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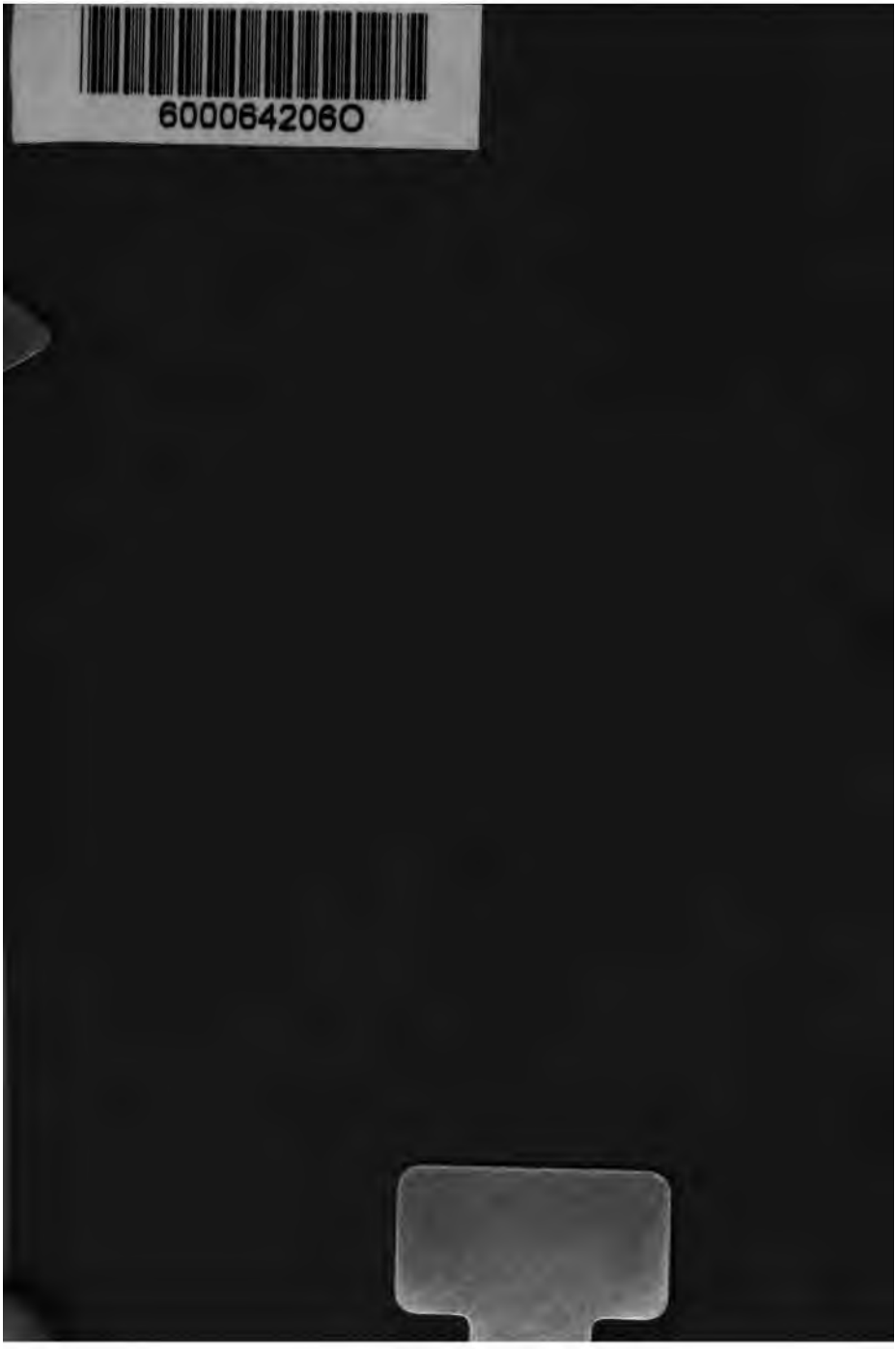
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YOUNG LORD PENRITH

BY THE AUTHOR OF

LADY FLAVIA


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YOUNG LORD PENRITH.

VOL. III.

YOUNG LORD PENRITH

BY

JOHN BERWICK HARWOOD

AUTHOR OF

"LADY FLAVIA," "LORD LYNN'S WIFE,"

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1880.

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251. f. 523.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY DUNCAN MACDONALD,
BLENHEIM HOUSE.

YOUNG LORD PENRITH.

CHAPTER I.

AT ALFRINGHAM.

THE third drawing-room at Alfringham, which, as has been mentioned, was so favourite a room with Mrs. Stanhope, on account of her belief that its pink hangings suited her complexion, was large enough to accommodate a numerous family. It did, for a wonder, contain, for the moment, so

many as three persons, since, besides Maud and her mother, Lord Penrith himself was there. The master of this grand house very seldom entered any of its sumptuously-furnished drawing-rooms. He lived in his own suite of apartments, and was rarely seen out of them except at dinner-time, when he and his sister habitually dined alone, in an enormous room that could not be cheerful in the absence of guests, despite the array of serving-men in and out of livery, and the blaze of gold and silver plate upon a sideboard that would have graced a royal festival.

What Mrs. Stanhope, naturally fond of gossip and tattle, of harmless dissipation and a town-life, must have suffered year after year during Maud's visits at Llosthuel Court

and elsewhere, and when she was compelled to dine alone with her solemn, silent brother, it would be difficult to estimate. Even the great fire of blazing logs could not in winter bring the social thermometer much above freezing point on these melancholy occasions. There was state and splendour in abundance. The stalled ox was served without the sauce of either hatred or love, merely garnished with frigid ceremony. There would sit the old peer, eating without zest, caring little or nothing for the wines which the grave butler poured into the array of glasses before him; there on the walls, frowned or smiled a double line of pictured ancestors, as if criticising the conduct of the then tenants for life; and there was the London ex-beauty, racking

her modicum of brains to find scraps of conversation that should prevent the dull meal from taking place in mere dumb-show. When Maud was at what was conventionally called her home, matters were pleasanter. Even my lord would be induced to talk a little then. For, if Lord Penrith cared for any living soul, it was Maud he cared for; and any servant of the house, any agent, or tenant, or whosoever was connected with the House of Beville, would have staked his life that Miss Stanhope was the destined heiress of Lord Penrith's estate.

And now, for a wonder, Lord Penrith was in the third, or pink, drawing-room. He had come in, leaning on the arm of his valet; and he had been lodged on a sofa, and propped up with pillows at precisely

the proper angle, near the fire; and there he was, spreading out his shrunken hands to get the benefit of the welcome heat. His lordship was always cold. His lordship was always ill, though smooth Dr. Bland would have been puzzled sometimes, had he been called upon to state before a jury of experts the precise nature of his noble patient's malady.

Yet that the old lord was ill, no unprejudiced person who looked attentively at his face could doubt or deny. He was that most pitiable, perhaps, of all sights, the wreck of a strong man. Handsome he may possibly have been; but he was not comely now, as old age often is. The high forehead was crossed by a thousand wrinkles; the eyes were bloodshot, restless, and un-

utterably sad; and the mouth, the most tell-tale of all features, had a silent eloquence of its own which told of pain long borne, but in no spirit of resignation. Altogether it was a speaking countenance, the face of a proud man, whose very pride had been caused to sting him, scorpion-like.

"How cold it strikes!" said my lord, peevishly.

There was a hot fire of crackling logs and glowing embers, ruby-red, and Alfringham Hall was supplied with all manner of cunning contrivances for sending heat everywhere throughout the spacious pile; nor was the weather by any means comparable to what people mean when they speak of an old-fashioned Christmas. But Mrs. Stanhope cordially agreed with her brother

as to the severity of the weather; and, had he pleased to aver the Dorsetshire climate to be one of arctic rigour, his devoted sister would have been as ready to endorse the assertion as were Hamlet's courtier-friends to liken the cloud to whale or weasel as his Highness pleased. Nor was Mrs. Stanhope consciously a hypocrite or a time-server, only that she had laid it down as a rule through life to defer to a brother who had so much in his gift.

Lord Penrith did not seem to care much for his sister's opinion as to the inclemency of the temperature. He was used to hear his words re-echoed, and regarded the circumstance as one of the adjuncts of his position.

"This pillow slips away each time I stir

my head," was the noble invalid's next remark. "Jackson said he had placed it properly; but Jackson is a fool, a self-sufficient fool, pig-headed, like all Cornishmen; and how I put up with him, or how the Duke bore with him, I cannot conceive, except that Glamorgan is a fool too."

Lord Penrith, in his querulous moods, was severe in his judgments, and did not spare his own order, as his observations on His Grace the Duke of Glamorgan, K.G., and his body-servant Luke Jackson, who was as careful and considerate a valet as a nobleman needed to have about him, sufficiently proved. Maud rose, and, with feminine dexterity, adjusted the pillow under the old man's head.

"Thank you, my dear!" said Lord Pen-

rith, more gently.—"Kate, have you had an answer to that letter of yours?"

"From the house-steward at Penrith House, do you mean, dear?" asked Mrs. Stanhope, hesitatingly.

"Of course I do," said the old peer, tartly. "Did you not desire him, at my wish, to get everything ready to receive us when we go up to London to-morrow, and ought he not to have sent the answer before this? Unless, indeed, Mr. Smith has gone down to spend Christmas with his relations in the country, and has left Penrith House to take care of itself; which would not surprise me. Nothing does."

Mrs. Stanhope feebly suggested that the post-bag had not yet arrived; and Maud reminded her uncle that Smith, the de-

faulter, had not as yet had time to reply in due postal course, but would doubtless do so by telegraph that day.

"Whether he does so or not," said Lord Penrith, decisively, "we go up to town to-morrow. My health is too precarious for me to be any longer a subject for your precious Dr. Bland, Kate, to try experiments upon. Bland is a smooth-tongued charlatan, kicked out of London practice to poison us in the country. I tell you he does not understand me in the least, not in the least. Sir Joseph does. Old Sir Joseph Doublefee is a humbug; but he *is* a physician, and he does know my constitution; and I choose to put myself under his hands again, at least for a time. As for any other things, London will be a shade more tire-

some, if that can be, than Alfringham.—Maud, would you kindly ring for Jackson?"

Jackson the valet came nimbly in response to the summons of the bell; and, leaning on the man's arm, Lord Penrith tottered, rather than walked, back again to his private apartments. There was not a stable-lad or a weeding-boy employed at Alfringham who probably did not get more enjoyment out of his life than did the noble master of all.

"My poor uncle!" said Maud Stanhope, when she and her mother were left alone together; and her tone expressed a pity that was more than conventional.

"So altered—so sadly different," sighed Mrs. Stanhope, "from his former self. In

one thing, my dear, he is unchanged, and that is his kindness to me. That has been unfailing since the days when I, quite a little child, used to look admiringly up to the bold, tall, elder brother who was even then a young man; for I am eighteen years his junior, you know."

Maud had most likely been informed on other occasions of the difference of age between Lord Penrith and his sister. At any rate, she expressed no surprise, but merely said:

"Poor Uncle Penrith! His has been but a sad life. I never realized it, I think, as I do now."

"How altered he is!" repeated Mrs. Stanhope. "Yet I can remember him as a handsome young man, hot-tempered, fiery,

and determined to have his own way always; but generous, and not the less liked because of his strong will. His temper, poor man! has cooled itself down now to mere fretfulness; and his very pride has turned inward, and become moroseness. But it was not always so. Before the great sorrow of his life, when Marmaduke the heir was brought back to the house dead, he was so different."

"I never quite understood that sad story, often as I have heard it mentioned," said Maud. "Those whom I remember to have spoken of it did so as if they feared to be overheard, like superstitious people who talk of ghosts and witches after dark."

"It was a terrible disgrace to the family, besides the horror of the crime," answered

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her mother. "But you, Maud dear, who may come to be mistress here some day, should surely know the truth, melancholy as it is. Marmaduke, the eldest son, was his father's favourite, and in disposition very like his father—only harder and more imperious. Even when almost a child, he domineered over the whole household, I think, and especially over his younger brother, George Beville, the—the murderer, you know——"

"Tell me," said Maud, with some interest, "what sort of person was this unfortunate man whom you call George?"

"I liked him," answered Mrs. Stanhope. "He was a sweet-tempered boy, and grew into a young man, handsome, indeed—all the Bevilles were that—but shy, timid, and

a bookworm. His father, who idolized Marmaduke, and encouraged him in his high-handed line of conduct, despised poor George as a milksop—though George was brave enough, as I remember, in time of need—on account of his preferring books to field-sports, and there was not much in common between them.

"Now George, as I have said, had a sweet temper, and his patience with his brother was astonishing; but sometimes it gave way, and there would be a heavy quarrel, in which, I am bound to say, Marmaduke was always obstinate, and always in the wrong. There had been such a quarrel, I recollect to have heard, on the morning of the miserable day when the wicked deed was done. The elder brother

had a notion that, as the heir of Alfringham and future chief of the family, he had a right to dictate to his cadet not only what he should do, but what he should think. And poor George in the course of his reading had picked up some newfangled notions—about the poor, I believe—which vexed his father, and made his brother very angry. But the dispute this time, though loud and hot, came to an end; and both brothers left the Hall together, and apparently on more friendly terms than had of late been usual.

"Hours passed, and neither George nor his brother came back; but there was no uneasiness; until just before dark—for it was winter, as it is now, and the days were short—there spread a rumour through the

place that Mr. Marmaduke was killed. It was too true. His body had been found lying near a stile, at the end of a footpath leading from the Ridge to the Bullbury Road. He must have been dead some hours, for he was quite cold. He had been shot through the heart. And beside him in the snow lay a pistol, silver-mounted, and with arms and initials engraved on a plate in the stock; a pistol which my nephew, George Beville, was known to have bought in London only a month before. And George did not come back, and all knew that he must be the murderer of his brother."

"How dreadful!" murmured Maud.

"Dreadful, indeed," replied her mother. "My brother's anguish was such as we

seldom behold, at least in a man. But then he had loved Marmaduke so fondly, and had gloried in the prospect of leaving an heir so worthy to succeed him in the title and property—indeed, he had begun to allow Marmaduke to interfere with the management of the estate in his father's lifetime, which many wise folks thought wrong—that the blow was hard indeed to bear. He never held up his head again."

"But the unhappy man who did it—George?" asked Maud.

"George wrote from abroad—from Paris, I think, but I am not sure as to the place—so soon, he said, as the report of his brother's murder, and that he was himself

suspected of the crime, reached him through the newspapers. He indignantly protested his innocence."

"Perhaps he *was* innocent, after all," said Maud, eagerly.

"No, no!" returned Mrs. Stanhope, with a sigh; "no one could believe that. The chain of circumstantial evidence—for of course there was no witness—was too strong. There had been a quarrel that very day between the brothers, by no means the first; then there was the discovery of the pistol; then George's absence; and then the younger brother's interest in becoming, as Marmaduke's death made him, heir to the title and estates. And George never ventured to come back and stand his

trial. All regarded this as in itself a proof of guilt; but I, remembering his sensitive, nervous nature, and how he shrank from blame, have never been quite sure. His father was sure. He would not even consider his son's assertions, made by letter, of his innocence, or trouble himself about the reasons George gave for his strange absence just then. He merely wrote a violent letter, cursing the fratricide, and casting him off for ever, with bitter regret that in going abroad as he had done George should have cheated the hangman. There came back but a curt reply to this, saying that the discarded son would trouble his unjust father no more. And that was the last news of George Beville, who died, we believe, in Aus-

tralia, in poverty; but even that remains uncertain."

"Perhaps he was innocent," repeated Maud, thoughtfully.

CHAPTER II.

COME TO HAUNT ME.

"PUSH, men, with a will! All together, now. And you, Barker, lock the wheels of that van, to stop its slipping down as fast as we get it up. One more try at it, and the thing is done."

It was Hugh who spoke, and he was just then busily engaged in superintending the removal—technically called shunting—into a siding of a number of empty cattle-vans and horse-boxes with which, in anticipation

of Bullbury horse-fair, the wisdom of the goods-manager had encumbered the small station of Hollow Oak. There was very little accommodation there in the shape of sidings unoccupied; and since it was necessary to clear the rails on the "down" side, this superfluous rolling-stock was, by Hugh's orders, forced up the steep incline of the only available siding, and the brakes put hard on.

"That's very dangerous, Edmunds," remarked Hugh, as the empty vans were at length disposed of.

"It is, sir," replied the shrewd head-porter. "No siding ought to be so steep; and a trifle would bring the whole lot of waggons down again, just, mayhap, as a train was passing. But we haven't time to

think of that now. My lord's going up to London by the 12.17 to-day. Word's been brought from the Hall."

Hugh reddened, and then looked very stern and cold.

"What will Lord Penrith require?" he said, not in his usual pleasant voice. "There is sure to be room in the train. I suppose he has only one carriage, so you can get a truck in readiness to convey that one."

And then he walked away, leaving Edmunds, who had been used to see the lord of Alfringham received with almost royal honours, sorely puzzled.

In due course Lord Penrith's carriage came down the road that led to Alfringham, and drew up at the station door amidst

much lifting of caps and touching of hats. Within it were the old lord, propped up with cushions, his sister, Mrs. Stanhope, and his niece.

"Train not in?" said Lord Penrith, querulously. "Then I'll go into the waiting-room. I won't stay here, to be chilled to the marrow. I will go into the waiting-room, while you attend to the carriage."

The train, technically known as the 12.17 on the "up" line, was not very punctual that day. The hands of the clock crawled on around the dial-plate. It was 12.30, then 12.40, and still no train. The subordinates at the station looked out impatiently for a distant puff of white smoke, listened eagerly for the sound of a steam-whistle. The train 12.17 was provokingly

that carriage. Surely the express is not far behind you?" said Hugh.

"Never you fear, Commodore," returned the guard, with a grin, as he bustled towards where Lord Penrith's carriage was being wheeled upon a truck; "I'm too old a railway bird to be caught napping. Express hadn't been telegraphed when we passed Stedham," he added, jubilantly. "Expect it's the state of the rails."

Hugh, less confident, glanced towards the signal-box; but no warning sign from the semaphore told of the approach of the express, which passed Hollow Oak without stopping. Meanwhile Lord Penrith, by the exertions of his valet and footman, had been placed securely in a corner of a first-class carriage, amidst pillows, cushions, and

all the paraphernalia with which a wealthy invalid sets off on a journey. Maud and her mother had also taken their seats. The doors were closed.

"Go ahead, Jim!" called out the cheery guard, when at that moment Hugh, looking over his shoulder, saw the danger signal, all too late, hoisted at the entrance of the deep cutting, and saw the swift express, unannounced, come thundering along the rails at a speed that nothing could resist.

There had been negligence somewhere —that was certain; there always is when a railway accident occurs; and it is invariably a task from which Minos would have shrunk to apportion the blame so as to make censure and punishment fall on those who

really deserve it. Station-masters and signalmen, telegraph clerks, guards, and drivers, had very likely each and all contributed their quota of blundering or indolence to the misconduct that threatened to end tragically enough. But the danger was so near and so dreadful that the thought of it swallowed up all other thoughts. Others besides Hugh Ashton saw the swift express come rushing through the gorge between the deep banks of the cutting, a torrent of wood and iron on its headlong way. There was a cry of horror, another, and then a loud shout, and an uplifting of arms; and Edmunds, with more presence of mind than the rest, snatched up a red flag, and waved it, to attract the attention of the driver of the coming train.

Alas! it was all too late. This was no case for puny remedies, such as shouts and gesticulation and the waving of flags. A train going at such furious speed as the express cannot be stopped like a horse flung back upon his haunches by the pressure of a powerful bit, in a moment. Those in charge of the express train had taken the alarm; but it was little that they could do. The driver had tried to reverse his engine. The guards were not idle. The spectators on the platform could hear the harsh rasping sound of the brakes, as, with a sort of stony-eyed horror akin to the dread fascination with which some fluttering bird gazes on the cold, gleaming eyes of the rattlesnake, they watched the onward rush of the rapid train.

There was no hope that the tardy train of 12.17, hardly in motion, and gliding with a scarcely perceptible movement along the platform, should avoid a fatal collision with the swift pursuer now so near. No hope save in the courage and the readiness of one man—and that man Hugh Ashton. The presence of mind which he had shown many a time in the face of danger, stood him in good stead now. Hardly had he seen the coming peril before the only means of averting it flashed, like a heaven-sent thought, upon his mind. Those waggons and vans in the steep siding—mere lumber an hour ago—now afforded the only available means of averting the catastrophe that was so imminent.

Without an instant's hesitation he dashed

across the line, undid the brakes of the foremost waggons, and, with desperate strength, set the whole array of horse-boxes and cattle-vans in motion. Down they came with a rattle and clang that was heard even above the thunder of the advancing express, and, with the impetus of the descent added to their own weight, rushed clear across the lines, blocking the railway from bank to bank. It was all that Hugh could do to escape from being crushed beneath their weight, as they brushed him by; but the deed was done, and a score of empty waggons and horse-boxes were interposed between the two passenger trains.

Then came the crash! No earthly power could have prevented the express from run-

ning into the empty rolling-stock in its path, with a rending and a splintering of iron and wood, and a cloud of dust and fragments, and from tearing its way through the impediment with a force that brought the wreck of the cattle-vans into sharp collision with the ordinary train ahead. But the violence of the first blow had been spent, happily, on horse-boxes and waggons, and the accident was not the terrible one that it had threatened to be. A carriage or two of the 12.17 train were wrecked utterly; all had panels and windows the worse; but of the passengers and railway servants there not a life, thanks to Hugh's boldness and forethought, was lost. There were bruises and contusions in plenty; some bones may have been broken; but such injuries passed

almost unheeded in the general joy and thankfulness. Not a life lost! Thank God for that! And forget not the brave man who risked his own to save others!

What a cheer it was that greeted Hugh Ashton when, breathless and bareheaded, he made his way back to the opposite side of the line, where already a crowd, such a crowd as the village could supply, was gathering to lend help to the passengers in the broken train. There were men who asked it as a favour to be allowed to shake his hand. There were mothers who, as they clasped their children to their hearts, addressed him as the preserver of their own lives and the lives of their dear ones, and prayed God to bless him!

But the passengers of the express were

not fortunate enough to escape more serious accident, since the force of the collision, checked as it had been by the strenuous efforts of engineer and brakesmen, had still been sufficient to convert the two leading carriages into a shapeless mass of wreck, and two of their occupants were killed, and thrice as many maimed and wounded.

In the midst of this excitement, Edmunds came suddenly up and laid his hand on Hugh's sleeve.

"My lord's hurt, I'm afraid—Lord Penrith, you know, sir," said the head-porter; and Hugh turned to see the old lord, supported by his servants, who were removing him from the carriage in which he had been seated. Beside him were Mrs. Stanhope, who had fainted, but seemed uninjured,

and Maud, who, unhurt, was bending over her mother.

"Is Lord Penrith wounded?" asked Hugh, and, at the sound of his voice, Miss Stanhope started and looked up. Her eyes and those of the young man met. Maud was very pale; she grew paler still, and it seemed as though she would have fallen, had not Hugh Ashton passed his strong arm around her and held her up. "My darling!" he exclaimed, reckless, in that moment, of all studied reticence, all worldly barriers that rank and fortune interpose between loving hearts. "My darling Maud!"

And Maud looked up, a timid wonder in her beautiful eyes mingling with a truthful admiration that enhanced her loveliness.

"I was frightened," she said, in a low voice. "I did not know you were here. I always feel so safe when you are near me."

Simple words these, and such as the terror and agony of the moment might excuse; but Maud for the moment neither resented Hugh's daring speech, nor attempted to free herself from the clasp of the arm that supported her.

"Mr. Ashton, our station-master, saved your lives, yes, of all of you, miss, begging pardon for speaking so free," said Edmunds, still under the influence of the exciting scene.

"Is it *your* praise that I hear on all sides? Must I thank you again for my life, that you saved before? It is so like

you!" murmured Maud; and never had music been so sweet in Hugh's ears as the sound of that low voice; but in the next moment Miss Stanhope, blushing, extricated herself from his hold, and said to her mother, now recovered from her faintness, and who was kneeling at the old lord's side: "I fear he is very ill, my poor uncle —he has not spoken since the shock. A doctor——"

At this instant Lord Penrith, who had seemed insensible, opened his eyes, and moaned feebly, looking first at his sister, and then at Maud, with evident recognition.

"What is it? Ah! I remember. Yes, I am hurt," muttered the old man; and then his restless eyes met those of Hugh, who

was bending over him. Instantly Lord Penrith's pallid face assumed a look of horror and dismay. "Go, go!" he said, shuddering. "Why has he come here, to haunt me at the last?" And then his eyes closed, and Mrs. Stanhope shrieked, for she thought him dead.

"He is not dead, but severely hurt, I fear," was Dr. Bland's verdict, when, five minutes later, he arrived at the station. "It will be better to send his lordship up to Alfringham at once, whilst I look after some of the other wounded passengers who are sadly in need of aid. And I should advise that medical assistance—the most eminent—be summoned by telegraph from London. Say Mr. Blades, my old principal, and of course Sir Joseph Doublefee, and

any other leading man. No time, in such a case, should be lost."

As Lord Penrith was placed in his carriage, which fortunately was not much the worse for the shock of the collision, for removal to his stately home, he spoke again, and twice, after he had reached Alfringham and been laid in his bed, surrounded by every care and luxury available to the ailing rich, he repeated, monotonously, the same words:

"Come to haunt me!"

"He must be wandering in his thoughts, from the effects of the blow. Poor Marmaduke!" said Mrs. Stanhope.

And before night, the great London doctors, called down by telegraph, arrived at the bedside of their noble patient. But

the medical town mice could but confirm the dictum of their colleague the country mouse.

"Severe internal injury," said Sir Joseph and Mr. Blades, M.R.C.S., but they said it very gravely; and they added that his lordship could not be in more careful hands than those of Dr. Bland.

It was long that night ere Maud could compose herself to sleep, so vividly did she recall, with strangely mingled sensations of shame, and what was almost pleasure, Hugh's words and looks, and the pressure of his encircling arm, at Hollow Oak Station. Something had suddenly awakened in her feelings towards Hugh Ashton as yet unsuspected; and she felt, with a sort of half terror, that, all unconsciously to her-

self, her heart, from the very first, must have been drawn, as by resistless force, towards Hugh.

CHAPTER III.

SIR LUCIUS.

SIR LUCIUS LARPENT, in no enviable frame of mind, sat before the fire in the billiard-room of Llosthuel Court, gazing at the glowing coals, as though, like the reputed wizards of a bygone age, he sought to read the future of his own and others' fortunes in their cavernous depths. He had a cigar between his lips; but its fiery tip had grown cold and grey through sheer forgetfulness on the smoker's part, and

presently he snatched it away and tossed it peevishly into the fire. Then he turned to a little table beside him, on which stood a silver tray, bearing glasses and decanters, and, filling a large wine-glass to the brim, not with sherry, but with strong Maraschino, tossed off the contents as if the potent liquor had been harmless cold water. Then he re-filled the glass, sipped slowly and relishingly the cordial within it, and, setting it down, drew a letter from his pocket, unfolded it, and began to read it.

The letter in question had been brought upstairs to Sir Lucius that morning along with the cup of chocolate and slice of toast which formed the baronet's apology for a breakfast. Sir Lucius had perused and re-perused it several times since then, and each

time with an anxious eye and frowning brow, which showed the tidings it imparted to be the reverse of agreeable. It was not a long letter, nor was it one of those stiff epistles on blue office paper, wherewith gentlemen learned in the law vex the souls of the laity, unskilled in legal jargon. Indeed it was obviously the letter of no gentleman, whether by Act of Parliament or otherwise, but of a person to whom penmanship was a pain, and orthography a distress, the curt product of severe toil at the scribe's distasteful task.

The reading of this letter, whatever it was, had stirred the noble nature of Sir Lucius to its lowest depths, and he was savagely intent upon the means of counteracting, without mercy or scruple, the course

of events which thwarted his most cherished projects. Without mercy or scruple—yes, the words were true as to the baronet's compassion for a foe or as to his readiness to remove a stumbling-block from his path —but there *was* a scruple, notwithstanding. The exemplary young dandy did not wish to put his precious neck in jeopardy of ever being subjected to the clammy touch of the hangman's fumbling fingers. And for this reason he desired to find a bolder villain than himself, some one—to quote that old Earl Angus who hanged King James's favourites over the Brig of Lauder—who would "bell the cat." And he thought he knew of such a one at Tregunnow.

Sir Lucius rang the bell.

"Bring me something—a sandwich," he

said, when the servant came; "nothing else; and be quick! There is sherry here. And tell Phillips to put the brown horse, Lightfoot, into the dog-cart instantly."

"Groom with you, Sir Lucius?" asked the under-butler, as he brought in the desired refreshment.

"No groom; but let them look sharp!" answered the baronet, gruffly. "No need, either, to come worrying round to the door. I'll get in yonder, in the yard."

Sir Lucius had been gruff and irritable all day long, short-tempered even with his imperial mother, rough with young Willie his brother, and snappish to Edgar, who had come in with a stripling's frankness, to challenge his senior to a game at billiards.

"Billiards! Knocking the balls about, you mean. No, thank you!" had been the baronet's cross-grained reply; and he had been left thenceforth to the hermit-like possession of the billiard-room.

Slowly and painfully, according to such lights as his keen but shallow intelligence could work by, Sir Lucius had shaped out and solved the problem that perplexed him. He must go to Pen Mawth. He must see the Black Miller—a tool useful for his purpose. What such men as Sir Lucius can never be made to see is, that such tools are two-edged; and that the ruffian or rascal they hire to do any dirty work with tongue or pen or bludgeon, is the most dangerous enemy, of their own making, that can be like a lion in the path.

It was easy for Lady Larpent's titled son to leave Llosthuel without having to answer inconvenient questions. He had refused, on slight grounds, or none at all, to be present at luncheon. Few young men, in country-houses, are to be seen at luncheon. It is not easy to get back from the stubble-fields, and from hunting impossible, when the ladies of the family are ready for the blameless enjoyment of their cutlets. But Sir Lucius, who ate no breakfast, could not well wait till eight o'clock for the prandial meal, and he was usually hungry by two. Hungry or not, he had his sandwich and his sherry, took up his overcoat, and went round to the yard, where his dog-cart, with the brown horse harnessed, stood ready.

"Like me to wait—anywheres, Sir Lucius?" said a pert dwarf in gaiters and striped waistcoat, a young London lad, mews-made, and who regarded the son and heir of the potential Dowager as only governor No. 2.

The ferocious reply which was made by the baronet as he drove rapidly away, was long remembered in the stable-yard* of Llosthuel.

A dog-cart is a vehicle capable of rapid locomotion, especially with only a single sitter behind the shafts; and Lightfoot was a good horse. The Cornish carters stared at the speed with which the gentleman, flogging hard—for Sir Lucius was a hard taskmaster to the noble beast which some of us love so well—shot past them. The

brown horse was all lather and foam when he came at a hand-gallop up to the station, twenty minutes too soon, and was left at a public-house which miners and market-folks frequented, while Sir Lucius took his ticket for Tregunnow. He took a ticket—not a return one—for Tregunnow, because he thought that thus, in case of need, he should best escape inquiry and recognition. And when the slow train, fraught with little but fish-baskets, tin, and a few packages marked "London—Immediate," and full of precocious vegetables from Scilly, came jumbling in, Sir Lucius took his seat in a mouldy first-class carriage that had the smell of a coffin, and was borne to Tregunnow, where he alighted in a fog and a drizzle of rain.

This time there were no boys at Tregunnow, outside the white gate, and on the gravel-path that was the property of the Company, and the only dry spot in sight. But the baronet, who now knew his way, preferred to dispense with a guide, and walked on, through the waning daylight and gentle rain, to Pen Mawth. He had the dubious good fortune to find the Black Miller—often abroad at fair and market—at home when he knocked. It was Ralph Swart's grim face that appeared in the half-opened doorway.

The Black Miller started a very little when he saw Sir Lucius Larpent at his door, and looked suspiciously out through the waning light and drizzling rain, as though to assure himself that the baronet was un-

accompanied. No one save Sir Lucius himself was in sight, so that Ralph Swart relaxed somewhat his mien of scowling defiance, and slowly, and, as it were, unwillingly, opened his door to the full width, growling, in the deep voice that sounded like the low roar of a lion: "Come in, if you wish it, young sir. You are free of the place." Something—it might have been the warning whisper, according to oriental belief, of his good angel—seemed to suggest to Sir Lucius to decline the invitation to enter, to give up the wicked purpose that had brought him out to Pen Mawth, and to make his way back to Tregunnow while the walk could yet be taken by daylight. But he disregarded the impulse, and he went in. The Black Miller closed the

door, locking and barring it as usual.

"And now, Sir Lucius Larpent, to business," roughly thrusting a chair towards the visitor, and seating himself beside the battered kitchen table, on which stood a petroleum lamp, already lighted, for within the house it was dark, and which threw its gleam full on Ralph Swart's strong harsh features and grizzled hair.

"To business, with all my heart," answered the baronet, assuming a gaiety he by no means felt. "You see, Mr. Swart, that our previous transaction did not turn out, after all, quite so successfully as we thought."

"I must ask you to explain, Sir Lucius," said the Black Miller, with so stern an accent and so dark a frown that the visitor

hastened to assume a more conciliatory tone.

"I meant to imply no species of blame to you, I can assure you," he said; "you did your work well, and the adventurer, the fisher-fellow, was got rid of, as regards Treport. But here he must needs, as if the Fiend himself were bent on placing him always in my path, find employment in Dorsetshire, close to my uncle's place—Lord Penrith's place, and, what is worse, attract my uncle's notice. I am speaking of Alfringham, near the New Forest, which you may have heard of."

"I *have* heard of it," returned the Black Miller, shortly.

"I thought as much!" retorted the baronet, and for his very life he could not

help giving a malicious intonation to his words. "Well, there's a station called Hollow Oak on the railway there, and that confounded fisherman has somehow got made station-master."

"Ha!" exclaimed the Black Miller; and then, after a moment's thought: "Well, Sir Lucius?"

"Anything but well, I think," replied the baronet, irritably. "This fellow Ashton is a meddling hound, and I shall know no rest until there is an end of his impertinent interference with my family. Some trumpery service he affects to have rendered Lord Penrith." And as he spoke he drew forth the letter which had preoccupied his mind throughout the day. "But this, which I received this morning from

my good uncle's valet, a certain Luke Jackson, whom I have found it convenient to enlist in my interest, tells the story better than I can. I will just read it aloud, if you please."

"I will listen," answered Ralph Swart, fixing his dark eyes, which gleamed like those of a vulture, on his visitor.

Sir Lucius drew a little nearer to the flaring lamp, so that the light might fall upon the writing of the Own Correspondent whose services as spy or chronicler at Alfringham he had deemed it politic to purchase. Then he began—

"Honoured Sir Lucius,

"In obedience to your wish for news from Alfringham, I beg to say,

my lord now is very bad, and no mistake, unable to leave his bed; and Sir Joseph and other London doctors had down to give opinions, with Dr. Bland in constant attendance. It came of a railway accident that happened at Hollow Oak, where we all were within an ace of coming to smash, going up to London. We were saved by the presence of mind of the new station-master, one Mr. Hugh Ashton, the same, oddly enough, that pulled Miss Maud out of the Welsh lake, and was captain of the steamer at Treport, and got my brother Salem discharged for mutiny; which that he is a fine young fellow cannot be denied. All the country is ringing with his praises for the brave action he did when we had such a narrow shave for our lives; and

Mrs. Stanhope and Miss Maud were very grateful, and also my lord, that has invited the young man to come up to Alfringham and receive his thanks in person, as I know. But they do say—though what business it is of his I cannot tell—this young Mr. Hugh goes about ferreting and raking for proofs about the old murder of my lord's eldest son by his brother, ever so many years ago. I mention this——"

"Ah, indeed!"

Very common-place words were in themselves these, by which the Black Miller interrupted the reading of the letter, but, from so formidable a personage, and uttered in a tone so grimly significant, they somewhat startled Sir Lucius, who, however, soon went on:

"Because such conduct is singular. Also, in accordance with your honour's wishes, and in part through my brother's assistance, I think it pretty clear that this Mr. Swart of the Pen Mawth Mill is no other than my lord's former steward, name of James Grewler, who made off with a heap of my lord's money four-and-twenty years ago, and has never been heard of since. The picture of him on the wall in the steward's house is exactly what you describe, allowing for his being younger then, and I don't wonder the likeness struck you at first meeting. So no more at present, from your faithful servant to command,

"LUKE JACKSON."

"Now," said the baronet, as he refolded

and pocketed the letter, looking the Black Miller full between the eyes as he did so, "it is pleasant, is it not—Mr. Swart, *alias* Grewler—to see our way?"

"Yes," answered the Black Miller, with a scowl and a flash of his savage eyes, but in a voice that was calm, and almost soft; "I like to see my way. You wish this young Hugh Ashton to be got out of yours, I suspect. And you come to me to help you, and prove to me very sensibly that you have recognized me, and so have a hold upon me, so that I can refuse you nothing. Have I read your meaning rightly, young sir? Ho, ho!"

And the Black Miller laughed. It was not a laugh good to hear, but deep and hollow, as we might imagine a ghoul's

laugh to be. There was an irony, too, in his tone, which to a warier ear than that of Sir Lucius might have impressed the necessity for caution. But he was so pleased with his own cleverness in getting a hold on his dangerous confederate that it was in a voice of ill-concealed triumph that he resumed:

"We can afford, now, to play with our cards on the table. I am ready to hand you a hundred pounds when I hear that the fisherman fellow can give me no further trouble. Personally, I prefer not to be mixed up in the affair. In Salem Jackson, the blackguard sailor at Treport, I should think you would find a convenient instrument, the rather that he has a grudge against young Ashton. And, as regards

the old history of my uncle's cash, I assure you that, if you deal but fairly with me, no one will care to ask for an account of your stewardship, or to identify James Grewler of the past with Ralph Swart of the present. Now we understand each other."

"Thoroughly," answered the Black Miller, in the same soft voice as before. "You may count on me. Especially as I am, after a fashion, in your power, as you will be in mine, ho, ho! when the job is done. Either of us could hang the other. But no need of that."

"Good-bye, then, Mr. Swart," said Sir Lucius, who was in haste to be gone, and, with a nod of leave-taking, he turned to the door.

Scowlingly, but promptly, Ralph Swart

undid the fastenings, and opened the door.

"Good evening, sir," he said, as the baronet stepped forth into the rain, and then reclosed the door.

"That was the way to deal with the fellow!" muttered Sir Lucius to himself, as he left the Pen Mawth Mill behind.

Meanwhile the Black Miller, after standing for some two minutes in deep thought beside the table on which stood the lamp, snatched up his hat, took down from the peg on which it hung his loaded riding-whip, and went softly out, carefully but silently locking the door behind him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD SHAFT.

IT is dreary enough, on a winter's evening, to be overtaken by the darkness, far from home, even when the road is one that we know well, and the district perfectly familiar. But Sir Lucius, stumbling on through the chilly rain and thick mist, in a rugged and stony ravine, down which the mill-stream, swollen by recent wet weather, made its way with sullen roar, bitterly lamented the inadvertence which had caused

him to be alone after dark in such a spot.

Had he but brought with him the boy who had on a previous occasion guided him to the Mawth Mill, or some similar boy, there would have been little risk of missing the track. As it was, however, he found it hard indeed to keep to the narrow and ill-defined path, and looked around more than once for some light, from cottage door or farm-house window, by which he might shape his course. But he saw, from the time of his leaving the Mill of Death, no signs of human habitation. The hamlet of Mawth itself, where once the serfs of the Montmorts had dwelt, and where Ralph Swart's hired men resided, was in a wooded hollow nearer to the ruined castle.

There were few dwellings between Pen Mawth and Tregunnow. Sir Lucius had to pick his steps as best he could among the rubbish-heaps and rotting lumber and cinders, which told where men had toiled, and ore been raised, and money spent, in the prosperous past that was, long since, a mere tradition.

Once or twice, as he threaded his difficult way among the stones and scoriæ and deep ruts made long ago, the baronet fancied that he heard footsteps behind him. But, when he stopped and listened, the sounds invariably ceased, and there was nothing but the moan of the low wind and the distant gurgling of the swollen mill-stream that he was leaving behind.

The cold rain fell fast and faster, and he

was shivering, and was glad to button his overcoat more closely around him; glad, too, to summon up such pleasant thoughts as he could muster, to counteract the depressing influences of the bad weather and the desolate landscape. How well he had come out of that business with the Black Miller! How skilfully he had played his cards, and how boldly withal! Yes, boldness was, with a ruffian of that stamp, the best policy, the best and the safest. He had a hold on Swart, or Grewler, and could count on his active aid in the removal of a hated obstacle, without compromising himself in the event of failure.

The odious fisherman fellow—that insufferable upstart who won praise and goodwill somehow—and on whose behalf Maud

Stanhope was provokingly ready to speak her mind—*his* run of luck, surely, must be almost over. It was unendurable that the future Lord Penrith should be thwarted and—— Again those stealthy footsteps! Sir Lucius turned briskly round, but he saw nothing and heard nothing. He called aloud, but there was no reply. He seemed to be alone with the gathering night and ceaseless rain.

He stumbled on, then, after a short pause, but suddenly came to a stop. Straight in front, at his very feet, yawned a blackness that was blacker than the night, and the blood ran cold in his veins as he reflected that he must have strayed from the path, and that a single step in advance would have hurled him, many a fathom

deep, down the silent shaft of some deserted mine.

"Lucky I stopped when I did, precious lucky!" said the baronet, as he picked up a pebble and tossed it down the yawning pit so near him.

It was long—or to his heated imagination it seemed long—before a faint sound, as of a stone splashing into water, came feebly to his ear. Sir Lucius could not repress a shudder, but he was angry with himself because of the fear that chilled his veins. Half mechanically he thrust his hand into a side-pocket of his coat, but found no hunting-flask replete with spirituous comfort.

As he did so, he thought that again he heard footsteps creeping up behind him;

but, as he turned his face, and shaded his eyes with his open hand, the better to pry into the darkness, a loose stone near him was violently displaced by the spurn of a heavy foot, and a smothered, savage imprecation made him recoil. Then the treacherous earth trembled, crumbled, and gave way beneath his shrinking feet, and, with one cry for succour or for mercy, the baronet stumbled, and fell headlong into the black gulf of the abandoned mine!

The Black Miller—for he it was, as may well be guessed, who had dogged his late visitor so closely—came crouchingly to the very edge of the pit. His powerful right arm had been uplifted, and in the strong hand was the loaded riding-whip ready to

strike; but Ralph Swart's murderous purpose had been balked by the sudden catastrophe that had removed his victim beyond his reach. With a sort of reluctance, the ruffian allowed the upraised arm to drop weightily by his side, and stooped over the brink of the shaft, listening greedily for the anticipated sound. Yes, it came at last, deep down, and muffled, the sullen splash of something heavy falling into water, and then there was silence, unbroken by moan or cry, a silence so profound and so terrible that even the hardened wretch kneeling there was in a manner constrained to break it.

Stooping perilously low, so as to throw the sound of his resonant voice down the shaft, he uttered a short exclamation, to

which the gloomy pit gave back, as if in mockery, but a hollow echo. Ralph Swart did not a second time disturb the sullen profound. He rose, and taking a box of matches from his pocket, struck a light, not once, but repeatedly, and, by the short-lived glimmer of each successive match, took a hasty but heedful survey of the spot.

"Nothing left about!" muttered the Black Miller, in grumbling accents. "Nothing—not a glove, not a stick, not so much as a half-burnt cigar, to tell tales, when the hunt begins. Ho, ho! Dead men—according to the old saw—tell no tales. But I am afraid they'll wait dinner long for Sir Lucius at Llosthuel Court this evening."

He laughed again, and chuckled, and laughed more ogrishly than before, as he stealthily picked his way among the stone-heaps; but a good judge of laughter would have set down Ralph Swart's rude mirth that night as an outburst of mere ribald bravado.

We can never, try as we may, divorce ourselves from the common ties of humanity, from the common rules of right and wrong; and even the most hardened ruffian will show an occasional gleam of remorse when a more than usually brutal crime has been perpetrated. But the Black Miller had physically a stout heart, and he felt less, as he groped his way back to the road, than many a meaner ruffian would have done.

"The cur!" muttered Ralph Swart, as he slowly and painfully threaded a path, through fog and thickening rain, amidst the rubbish-heaps, and the unfenced mouths of abandoned mines, and the mouldering lumber—"the cowardly cur, without even the courage necessary to back his selfish scheming—it served him right that he should finish thus! He must have been a dolt to come here, an idiot to threaten *me!* But as for Hugh—young Hugh"—and here the Black Miller changed his tone to one of involuntary respect—"there *is* a man, plague him! It would be worth while, now ——" As he spoke, Ralph Swart halted, and drew himself up to his full height, throwing out his brawny arms like a wrestler who challenges an opponent.

"He is the younger man," cried the Black Miller, boastfully; "but I—I never met my match!"

And very terrible this fierce, shrewd, pitiless man would have looked, had any eye pierced through the curtain of mist and darkness to see him as he stood, alone in the waste, frowning grim defiance on an imaginary foe. His vast strength, resolute countenance, and threatening attitude caused him to resemble some rough-hewn statue of a gladiator, ready to commence the struggle in a Roman arena, where blood and bone and muscle were pitted in deadly strife, amidst the clapping of soft hands, and offering of wagers, as on a modern race-course.

Then Ralph Swart's mood seemed to

change, for his arms fell to his sides, and his head was bowed, and it was slouchingly, and with a clownish gait, that he regained the well-known track, and plodded upwards, along the path that bordered the roaring mill-stream, towards the Mawth Mill.

It rained hard and harder; but, as often happens, the fog thinned and waned, and, through a rift in the clouds, the sickly moon peeped out, and threw a pale lustre on the dark keep of the ruined castle where once the Barons of Montmort dwelt, clutching what was theirs, and more, by the strong hand and the hard heart. It was a lesson lost on the unlettered peasant who passed by; but to the Black Miller it did seem to suggest ideas, for he stopped, and

looked cynically at the old robber-hold of the Norman noble.

"What does Aristotle say," he growled out, "about the tyrant's life, in his time? The Greek slips my memory; but there could have been no great difference between a lord in Hellas and a vavasour of feudal times, save that the one had no suzerain, and the other had. Either lot would have suited me, ho, ho! either would have suited me well enough."

As he spoke, he came in sight of the dark mass of his own mill-tower, overshadowed by crags, and was soon at his own door. He unlocked the door, with the key that he carried in his pocket, went in and reclosed it, barring, bolting, and locking it, as if to stand a siege. Half an hour

afterwards the flaring petroleum lamp that had stood so long on the kitchen table was extinguished, and every window of the miller's house was dark.

CHAPTER V.

RALPH SWART'S RIDE.

IT was the second day after that which had witnessed Sir Lucius Larpent's second and disastrous visit to the Mawth Mill, and towards noon, that the Black Miller rode clattering into the stony streets of Treport. He put up his horse at a small inn frequented by farmers from the country round, and strode off on foot, choosing such thoroughfares as were the loneliest, and making his way towards a remote part of

the little seaport town. He had an appointment to keep. On the previous day he had himself posted at Tregunnow a letter which was to give notice to the person with whom he desired to confer to be in readiness at the trysting-place he had selected. And, from what he knew of Salem Jackson, he had little doubt that the Americanised Cornishman would readily fall in with his views.

It was a wet, wild day. Fierce gusts of wind, chasing before them, like hunted creatures, the blurred and ragged masses of the clouds, swept at intervals over land and sea, and heavy showers succeeded to them; while those who were reputed weather-wise predicted a coming storm that should play havoc with farm-stock and shipping alike.

As it was, the bad weather of the last two weeks had deluged the low-lying lands, and converted brooks into rivers, and trickling rills into brooks. The mill-stream at Pen Mawth was so swollen that the mill had ceased working, and labourers had been employed during the whole of the preceding day in repairing the dam and strengthening the sluice. But in the morning the Black Miller had risen early, had prepared his own rude breakfast, and saddled his own horse, and ridden slowly off through the dim light of the wintry dawn, locking the door of his house, and marking it with a broad cross in chalk, by which token the hind who acted as his servant would learn that for that day his customary household duties need not be discharged.

Ralph Swart had but seldom been in Treport, some five or six times perhaps, during the many years of his residence at Pen Mawth. But he was one of those men whose powers of observation are quick, and their memory for localities tenacious. Few natives of the little coast-town, Treporters born and bred, could have found their way more unerringly among the devious byways, the stairs, and alleys that intersected the outskirts of the place, than did the dangerous tenant of the Mawth Mill. And at last he reached the spot which he had selected as the scene of his conference with the kindred spirit whom he had chosen to aid him in his dark designs. Nothing would have been easier than to have arranged for an interview in a private parlour of some

tavern or inn. But the Black Miller preferred, like the Douglas of old, rather to hear the lark sing than the mouse squeak, and mistrusted partitions and doors as convenient hiding-places for surreptitious eavesdroppers.

It has been mentioned that there was a lane, winding upwards between high banks, and which furnished the shortest path, although steep and rugged, from the beach to the environs of Llosthuel Court. It was up this lane, the lower end of which almost skirted old Captain Trawl's garden hedge, that Hugh Ashton had wended his way when, before quitting Treport, he sought one parting look at Maud's windows, from beyond the fence of Lady Larpent's rose-garden. A quieter spot than this, or one

in which conversation was less liable to interruption, could not easily have been found so near Treport; for the dwellings bordering on the lane occurred only at rare intervals, and the foot-passengers who traversed it were rarer still.

It so happened that Rose Trawl, a little basket on her arm, came tripping lightly down this winding lane, returning from some household errand, when suddenly, as she was about to turn an angle ot the rocky road, she heard what made her stop as abruptly as if by magic art her feet had become rooted to the ground. The words she heard were: "This Hugh Ashton, fine fellow as they think him, will get the worst of it for once, ho, ho! the worst of it for once!" The speech was ambiguous; but

there was that in the deep, hoarse voice that uttered it which made Rose Trawl's heart almost cease to beat, so fraught did it seem with malice and menace.

"He can't get worse than *I* wish him," said another voice, higher and shriller, and which Rose fancied that she had heard before. "Confound him! if this had been New Orleans instead of Treport, I'd have settled scores with him long ago, for getting me sacked from the steamer. But bowie-knives don't pay in this benighted old island, boss!"

Rose rallied all her courage, and, herself unseen, peering cautiously round the cover of the rock, saw the two men to a portion of whose conversation she had listened. One was a stranger, a large-made, powerful

man of middle age, with a dark, stern face, booted and spurred, and with a heavy whip under his arm. He held a written paper in his hand, which the other, who was dressed as a seaman, and in whom Rose recognized Salem Jackson the mutineer, was in the act of receiving from him. One glimpse was enough, and then the girl cowered down behind the rock, like a hare in its form. Would they murder her, this pair of evil companions, if they detected her in the act of listening to the details of the wicked plot against her good friend and former guest, Hugh Ashton? It seemed not unlikely; but then had not Providence sent her there to frustrate the conspiracy, and should she not be brought unharmed out of the peril of the moment!

She held her breath, and waited to hear more.

"This is better than bowie-knives!" said the tall, dark man, authoritatively. "Do not lose this paper, with the address of the inn at Bullbury, and let us consider it a bargain. The contents of the cash-box are your perquisite. The hundred pounds you shall have as soon as you have earned them by bringing about the ruin of the man you hate. Let me know for certain that Hugh Ashton has left Hollow Oak Station with iron bracelets round his wrists, a disgraced man for life, and you shall have the sum I mentioned, all in gold. Here are five sovereigns for expenses." And the money clinked as it was put into the sailor's ready palm.

"All right, Ralph Swart!" exclaimed Salem Jackson, joyfully. "A bargain it is. But I can tell you, Mr. Swart, or Grewler, I don't do it as much for the yellow shiners as to be revenged on that coxcomb of a Captain, forsooth! And a fine vengeance, too!"

"Ay, and safe!" muttered his confederate, in a tone of ill-disguised contempt. "Drop me a line at Pen Mawth Mill, near Tregunnow Churchtown, to say when the job is done."

And then, to Rose's inexpressible relief, the two voices and the footsteps of the speakers died away gradually in the distance. But although the rain, which had set in again, beat heavily upon her crouching form, the girl did not dare to rise and

continue her homeward route until many minutes had elapsed.

Meanwhile the Black Miller, having parted with his accomplice, made his way, in the same circuitous fashion as that which he had previously adopted, back to the inn where he had left his horse. He dined alone, eating voraciously, as was his wont, and drank deeply afterwards, chuckling to himself, as he sat at his solitary table, his hat drawn down over his massive brows, and a glass of stiff grog before him, while the storm increased, and the short-lived daylight waned. Then he called for his bill, and ordered his horse.

"A rough, wild night, squire," said the wondering hostler, as he brought round the horse to the inn-door.

"Who cares!" answered Ralph Swart, with an oath, as he swung himself into the saddle, and clattered up the street, and out into the open country.

A wild night it was, and a toilsome ride that lay before him. The shrieking wind swept by with furious force, and the blinding rain fell in such sheets, and with such violence, that it was hard to make head against it. The horse the Black Miller rode, a thorough-bred, purchased cheaply from Sir Lucius Larpent, and always vicious-tempered, reared and swerved in a manner that would have unseated an average horseman. Again and again did the terrified horse refuse to face the storm, and each time his rider forced him on, at a hand-gallop, in the teeth of howling wind and

driving rain. The tempest seemed to gain in strength as Ralph Swart left Treport and the coast behind, and crossed the moorlands, rolling far away inland. The very road was like a lake, while great pools of water had collected in the lower fields, and still the rain fell, and still the wind rushed by with a sound like the cry of wolves clamorous for their prey.

Strangely enough, the spirits of the Black Miller seemed to rise as he confronted the fury of the storm. He sang snatches of old half-forgotten songs, and laughed with a grim enjoyment of the tumult of the elements, and of his own iron nerves and iron frame that rendered him indifferent to all. The snorting horse in vain tried to break from the control of the rider, in vain

plunged and reared, swerving across the flooded road, and straining at the bit. Ralph Swart merely laughed and spurred on, firm in his saddle, as though he had been a centaur indeed.

Presently the landscape grew more familiar. To the left were a few scattered lights that must proceed from the windows of Tregunnow Churchtown. To the right, dimly descried through the shadows of night, rose an ungainly black mass, that could be no other than the Hill of Death, looming far over the dismal landscape which it crowned. Near the road were strewed rubbish-heaps uncounted, piled up, as Ralph Swart well knew, near the yawning mouth of many a worked-out mine.

It was with a sort of chuckle of self-con-

gratulation that he remembered the visit of Sir Lucius, and how it ended. He had done that day another stroke of business, had blighted—so he hoped—the life of one who had indeed harmed him in nothing, but whose existence was to him a standing source of danger. What cared he for wet or mire, or the toil of the long ride? His jaded horse went quietly enough beneath him now.

How loud was the roar of the mill-stream as it rushed, torrent-like, down the ghastly ravine, topped by frowning crags, in which his mill was built! But here was the mill itself now, and his journey was over. Dismounting, Ralph Swart led his weary horse into the shed that did duty for a stable, unsaddled it, and, replacing the

bridle by a halter, tossed a measure of corn into the manger, and shook down some marsh-hay into the clumsy rack. Then, carrying the stable lantern, which it had been his first care to light, in his hand, he shut the door of the shed, and entered his own house, the door of which he locked, barred, and bolted with his usual jealous care. How loud was the roar of the mill-stream as it rushed, washing and gurgling among the stones hard by! Never had the Black Miller heard it sound so portentously during all the years of his tenancy of the Mill of Death.

CHAPTER VI.

ROSE WRITES TO MAUD.

ROSE TRAWL'S very natural terror, so long as she ran the risk of being discovered in her hiding-place behind the rock by those with regard to whom she had involuntarily played the part of a spy, gave place, so soon as she had gained the security of her own home, to an equally natural indignation. She trembled now, not for herself, but for gallant Hugh Ashton, knowing, as she did, that the very

frankness of the young man's generous nature was likely to render it the more easy for his enemies to ensnare him to his ruin. That the pair of conspirators whose talk she had overheard were not likely to be restrained by any scruples, she could well believe. Salem Jackson bore but an indifferent character in his native place, and although reputed more untrustworthy than truculent, was known to have uttered threats at the bar of more than one public-house against his former Captain.

By far the most dangerous of Hugh's unsuspected foes, so Rose deemed, was the Black Miller. That shrewd, massive face, swarthy as that of a Spaniard, and lit up by those baleful eyes, was not readily to be forgotten. Ralph Swart was one of those

men whose daring it is impossible for the most casual observer to doubt, and whose strength and cunning would forbid the boldest to despise their enmity. Hugh must be warned. Hugh must be saved. But how? Rose could not venture to tell her ailing grandfather, whose health had lately altered for the worse, what she had overheard. "He should be kept quiet," the doctor had said; and besides, the old sea-captain, as unsuspicious as a child by temperament and habit, was by no means the sort of counsellor in such a strait as this.

Lady Larpent was the personage whose image next rose up in poor Rose's bewildered imagination; but there were two reasons why an appeal to the strong-willed

Lady of Llosthuel seemed to be out of the question. It had filtered round somehow, through small tradesfolk and through the servants at the Court, that the Dowager's early liking and esteem for Hugh Ashton had changed, for some inexplicable reason, into frigid disapprobation. And then Lady Larpent was known to be in trouble just then, concerning the unaccountable disappearance of her eldest son, Sir Lucius, relating to whom all manner of vague and alarming reports were in circulation. To whom, then, could Rose turn, save to her betrothed husband, Will Farleigh! But the young ornithologist was absent just then, on one of his professional rambles in search of rare specimens that would be acceptable to collectors; and a day, and the

better part of another, were thus unavoidably lost.

When Will Farleigh did come back, and heard his sweetheart's story, pretty Rose had no need to complain of the lack of sympathy. That Hugh Ashton—dear, brave Hugh—the man who had saved his life, and whose friendship he felt to be an honour, should be threatened by hidden foes, with some cowardly vengeance half explained, was enough to awaken every manly impulse in the bird-hunter's nature.

"Swart—Ralph Swart—and Pen Mawth Mill—you are quite sure of those names, Rose dear?"

Yes; Rose was quite sure.

"Well," said Will, thoughtfully, "I have heard tell in the country, inland, of such a

mill and of such a man, and never heard any good of either. But did not the other scamp, Salem Jackson, call this Swart by another name—I did not catch that?"

Yes; Rose was certain that she had heard the Black Miller addressed by two names. One was Swart, the other was Grewler.

"But then, what do they intend to do? It can't be murder, because of what was said about iron bracelets!" said Will, staring hard at a beam which spanned the ceiling, as if he hoped to find an explanation written there.

"Salem Jackson did talk of bowie-knives!" said Rose, gravely.

"But Salem Jackson's more brag than do!" returned her affianced one. "He's

but a coward, slippery as he is. I happened to hear him, a fortnight ago, abusing Captain Hugh at the 'Blue Anchor,' and I promised him a set of aching bones if he dared breathe a word against a man whose little finger was worth Salem's whole body. He was the bigger of the two, but he only looked black, and slunk out. No; if he does mischief, it'll be by stealth, and in a sneaking way, as suits him."

"But the other—that Swart, or whatever he is—he looked wicked, but bold as a black lion!" objected Rose.

"Ay, that, if all tales be true, is a bird of another hackle!" answered her lover, meditatively. "But then, Rose, as luck will have it, your black lion does not seem to care to go to Dorsetshire himself, but pre-

fers to send out his skulking jackal, as I've read that lions do at times, to do his dirty work for him. What are *we* to do is the question? Captain Hugh's so open and fearless, it would be useless to caution him. Stop! You know Miss Maud there—at her uncle's fine house at Alfringham, close by—she always was kind to you—and she should be kind to Hugh, that saved her from drowning in Wales yonder. Can't you write to Miss Maud, and I'll carry the letter?"

Rose looked aghast at first, partly at the proposal that she should write a letter, diffident as she felt of her own powers as a correspondent, and partly at the idea of addressing, with pen and ink, a lady by birth, and an heiress.

"Very kind she always was—but I've not often spoken to her, Will, not above half a dozen times!" said the girl, shyly.

However, for Hugh's sake, and with Will's help, the letter was written. Here it is:

"Treport, December 29, 18—.

"HONOURED MISS MAUD,

"Excuse the liberty I take—Will Farleigh, who, as Lady Larpent knows, is to be married to me as soon as we are Rich enough—will carry this letter himself, all the long way from Cornwall to my lord your Uncle's grand home in Dorsetshire—but I am drove to intrude by the Peril of one respected and Liked by us all. I am no great scholar, nor clever with my

Pen, but sooner than Harm should come to Captain Hugh Ashton, to whom all Owe so much, he being the brave good young man we all know him to be, I would walk every step of the road, if needed, to say how Wicked men have plotted his Ruin. Which William Farleigh, who takes this, will explain, and how by the Lord's mercy I was enabled to overhear bad people—names of Salem Jackson, which, for our shame, he is a Cornishman, and sailor here, and Ralph Swart—or Grewler—called the Black Miller of Pen Mawth, Tregunnow Churchtown, talking how to do our friend hurt, and bring Disgrace to him that deserves so well of All.

"I hope my Lord Penrith is quite well. I hope Mrs. Stanhope is quite well. And,

with best respects, no more now from your grateful servant, "ROSE TRAWL.

"For God's sake, get my lord to protect Captain Hugh."

With this letter, Will Farleigh, with Rose's savings in his pocket, to eke out his own meagre ones, started by the night-train from the nearest station, to which, for time-saving, he hired a gig from the same inn at which the Black Miller had put up his horse, and travelled all night.

The morning was well advanced before, walking from Stedham Station, at which, it being a larger place, more trains stopped than at Hollow Oak, the traveller had alighted, Will came in sight of the stately pile of Alfringham.

Now, there was really no particular reason why Rose's affianced husband should not have rung the door-bell, stated his name and whence he came, and obtained an interview with Miss Stanhope. But he thought there was; and Rose had been strongly of opinion that he must approach Miss Maud secretly, and deliver his credentials in quite a mysterious fashion. And, when he saw how very big and splendid was Lord Penrith's mansion, Will's heart failed him a little, and he began to think that the hardest part of his task yet lay before him.

To deliver a letter privately, even for the best of motives, to a young lady of high degree, dwelling beneath the roof of such a relative as was the noble master of Alfring-

ham, is no easy matter. Figaro or Scapin might manage it, by some display of practised impudence; but otherwise it is hard indeed. However, fortune befriended the young bird-stuffer, in that he met Miss Stanhope in the park, and close to the garden gate, and alone. Will introduced himself promptly enough, putting the letter forward, however, and keeping himself in the background to the utmost of his power, precisely as Rose, in her awe of a social superior, had thrown the onus of explanation on Will.

Miss Stanhope read the letter with an agitation of manner which surprised the young Cornishman, but was much perplexed by its contents. Plots and conspiracies were things so foreign to the world in which

she had lived, a world of decorous observances and of conventional propriety, that she seemed bewildered, until Will's almost verbatim account of the conversation which Rose Trawl had overheard convinced her of the danger that menaced Hugh.

Then Maud read the letter of her humble friend once more, and this time understood it. Now she could see the peril, undefined and shadowy; but not on that account the less to be dreaded, that impended over him she loved. And, in the fear of losing him, in her natural womanly anxiety for his safety, she all but forgot the tacit lesson that she had learned through life, the pride of her superior station. For an instant she forgot that Hugh was but a poor fisher-

man, who, by gallant efforts, and by the force of a character singularly noble, pure, and strong, was winning his way upwards in the world. For an instant she forgot that she was a lady, and only remembered that she was a girl that loved.

"You are Hugh's friend!" she exclaimed, putting her hand on Will's arm; "and you owe him, as I do, a life. Help him now, dear Mr. Farleigh; for my poor help, which sweet Rose has written, ah! so prettily, to ask, avails little now. My uncle—Lord Penrith—is ill and old, and since the late accident on the railway—brave Hugh again! always foremost when good deeds are done—passes half the day in lethargic sleep. Go and warn him, good friend! Warn Captain Ashton that traitors are plot-

ting—not his death—who dares meet him, face to face?—but some cruel scheme, to which his own guileless confidence may—— Oh! warn him, tell him what you have told me—and—and if you will come to the Hall and tell me that all is well, I will bless dear Rose Trawl and you for the good deed done."

So Will Farleigh set off for Hollow Oak Station, while Maud went back to her room to pray for him she loved.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TWO LETTERS.

"TWO letters for you, Mr. Ashton," said Edmunds, the head-porter, as Hugh, who now found more time on his hands than he could easily dispose of, returned, after one of the solitary rambles that were now habitual to him, to the station. One of these—which was sealed with red wax, and bore the impression of a coat of arms such as the Herald's College grants for

money in this degenerate age, when the heraldic instinct seems dead, and the simple beauty of antique blazons unattainable—was from Mr. Dicker.

Hugh's patron, in kindly terms enough, informed his young friend of his intention, on a tour of inspection, in company with two other directors, of visiting Hollow Oak Station on the ensuing day. Mr. Dicker, as deputy chairman, named two o'clock as the probable time for the arrival of the Directors' special train, hinted at possible promotion for Hugh, as the result of his late courageous action, and expressed his intention of formally verifying the accounts and receiving the amount of cash accumulated at the station.

Now it so happened that the sum-total of

the cash under Hugh's charge was, for so very minor a station, unusually large. There are, of course, regular rules as to the paying over of moneys in the hands of station-masters into those of a Company's manager, or deputy manager; but these rules admit of exceptions, and one such had been made in the case of Hollow Oak. The late station-master, Mr. Weeks, had left a hoard of his employers' gold and silver behind him; while an unusual amount of ready-money had been lately received, on account of cattle, sheep, poultry, and other agricultural produce, alive or dead, which had been transmitted to London at that hungry Christmas-time. Hugh had a hundred and ninety-three pounds, odd shillings, in the cash-box which was kept, as

usual, in the station-master's house, ready to be handed over to the proper authorities.

As for the accounts, there could be no difficulty about them. They were short, simple, and had been kept so steadily posted up that a very brief survey would suffice to audit them. Hugh thought much more of the friendly terms in which the capitalist addressed him, and of his satisfaction in seeing that kind face again, than he did of the responsibility which his position entailed upon him.

The other letter, however, now claimed his attention. It was very different in appearance from Mr. Dicker's, being an ill-written and untidy missive enough, the contents of which, however, when he opened

it, were such as to send the blood rapidly coursing through his veins. These were the words of the letter:

"SIR,—If you will take the trouble to be at Bullbury to-morrow (market-day), and will meet, at the 'Chequers' in King Street, a person who Wishes you Well, and will be in waiting there at one o'clock p.m., you may learn some information of value to you in the search in which you are engaged. Mr. Ashton is advised, for the sake of what he holds dear, not to fail at time and place, where I shall count upon meeting you."

Such was the letter, which was in the strictest sense anonymous, in so much that it bore no pseudo signature, such as "Lovers of Justice," and the like, are wont to ap-

pend to the epistolary arrows they launch in the dark. And Hugh was not the less inclined to place some credence in the good faith of his unknown correspondent, on account of the grammatical slips, or the irregular transition from the third person to the first, which the letter itself contained. But in any case he should have blamed himself had he flung away a chance, no matter how slender or how desperate, of elucidating the dark mystery that he had vainly tried to pierce.

It was quite true that since Hugh's appointment to Hollow Oak Station he had made many inquiries, guardedly, as he thought, but not so guardedly as to avoid the appetite for gossip which is the bane of a country neighbourhood. But he had

gained no information worth the having. Gipsy Nan alone seemed to possess a clue to the secret that he would have given his very life to solve; and, although he had tried, repeatedly, to meet with the wayward wanderer again, he had failed to obtain a second interview. Her people, even, seemed to have shifted their camp to another part of the Forest, and could not be met with. Hugh felt that he had no choice but to accept the anonymous invitation to the "Chequers" at Bullbury.

Hugh never hesitated as to keeping the rendezvous which had been given to him by his unknown correspondent. It so happened that no duties of an urgent character compelled him to be at Hollow Oak at or near the hour named in the letter. Had

his nameless friend been cognisant of the ordinary routine of the little official colony, he could not have timed more conveniently the hour appointed for the responsible chief of the station to be seven miles off, at Bullbury. At one o'clock the porters went to their well-earned dinners, in the full conviction that there was nothing to do. Later on there would be lumbering Parliamentaries that stopped at Hollow Oak, and swift trains that went by like the wind, but which, unlike the wind, required clear rails and elbow-room. But for the moment the station-master and his subordinates had really nothing to do.

Hugh borrowed a farmer's horse—his Australian experience of bush-leapers and buck-jumpers had been noised abroad, and

he had been begged to break in more than one skittish colt, since he came to Hollow Oak—and rode over to Bullbury. The chief hotel there, like the only public-house in Hollow Oak, bore the name of the "Beville Arms." But Hugh did not choose to patronise the chief hotel; nor did the "Angel," the "Rose and Crown," or the "Harp," dear to Irish labourers employed on the canal works, find favour in his eyes. Inquiring his way, he rode up to where the ancient sign of the "Chequers" swung aloft over cobble-stoned King Street, and there dismounted.

There was not much business done, even on market-day to all appearance, at the "Chequers Inn," Bullbury. Inns, like other institutions, have their fashion, and

run to seed. The "Chequers" of Bullbury, third-rate at best, was now, to judge by the eye, obsolete. Two or three farmers or bailiffs had what they called their "traps" in its grass-grown yard. A few horses were rattling their halters in its damp stable. The waiter, who ran about carrying half-cooked meat and half-boiled vegetables to grumbling chance customers in the mouldy old coffee-room, was out at elbows, and had white seams to his coat, and a general air of irritable dejection. The very mastiff in his kennel seemed infected by the insolvent melancholy of the place, and whined instead of barking. It was plain that the "Chequers" was in a bad way of business.

But Hugh saw no sign of anybody on the look-out for him, or for any stranger. Over and over again did he pace up and down before the wide gateway, down which the winter wind whistled shrilly; but not a glimpse could be caught of any person who seemed likely to communicate tidings of importance. The few people in the mouldy coffee-room appeared to be gloomy and pre-occupied, men who devoured a bad dinner in hurried fashion, then called for the bill, and snarled at it, and were stingy to the ineffably shabby waiter, and went out into the town, declaring in no measured language that the "Chequers" was a rat-hole that should have no more of their patronage.

But, as for anyone intent on him or his concerns, Hugh Ashton felt as though he might as well have been in the Sahara itself, amidst yellow gravel, and thorn bushes, and driving sand, such as constitute every wilderness from the Pillars of Hercules to many-hued Nile. There seemed to be not a soul, in or near the inn, whether man or woman, whose mind was busy on any other subject than the welfare of the thinker. When Hugh asked the hostler if any strange gentleman were waiting about, the rough fellow, in his catskin cap and fustian jacket, replied by asking if Hugh "knowed of a place where a poor man as knowed horses, and did 'em justice allays, could make a living."

And the fluffy-haired waiter, in a white-

seamed coat, and pumps down at heel, confided to Hugh his desire to serve some member of the British aristocracy, in town or country, "where I might be treated a little less of a negro slave, and have a trifle wholesomer victuals, when dinner-time does come!" concluded the waiter, with suppressed vehemence, and a stealthy shaking of a feeble fist towards the window of the room wherein his bankrupt master, his lean wife and unruly children, were dining noisily.

At last Hugh went back, baffled and perplexed. Had Ghost Nan been the writer of the letter, and, if so, why had she failed in keeping the appointment? Hugh could not tell; but, at any rate, he had lost nothing save his time. On riding back to

Hollow Oak, he found the station peaceful, and the regular routine of the day going on as steadily as ever.

CHAPTER VIII.

SALEM JACKSON'S STRATAGEM.

AS a gaunt and hungry winter-wolf prowls about a sheepfold, half maddened by the scent of live mutton that comes steamingly from the woolly flock, close-packed within, and yet keenly anxious to keep clear behind him the track by which his tireless gallop over snow and sward, through bush and brake, may outstrip hound and horseman, until he sees the

Pyrenees, with peak unscaled by human foot, and cavern into which none but the "grey beast" dares to creep, towering aloft like the ramparts of his city of refuge; even so did Salem Jackson, once a mariner on board the steamer *Western Maid*, range around the station of Hollow Oak.

Hugh, who knew him, was away. Salem Jackson, prompted by the Black Miller, had taken care that such should be the case. His anonymous letter, backed by Swart's local knowledge, had drawn away, on a false scent, the object of his hate and fear. The former mutineer had never forgiven the blow by which Hugh Ashton, on the occasion of the shipwreck, had caused him to measure his length on the steamer's deck; but then he had never forgotten it,

and the remembrance of his former captain's superior prowess cowed him. Salem Jackson was of quite another order of scoundrelism from that to which his grim employer, Ralph Swart, belonged. Had any man struck the Black Miller a blow, there would have been a grapple indeed, from which one or other would hardly have emerged alive and unmaimed. But Salem Jackson was of another mould. He feared hard knocks. He feared the law. He had used the knife, and had fired the revolver, not always with lethal consequences, in southern cities to the west of the Atlantic. But that was because others did so, and because, in tavern brawls at Memphis or New Orleans, it was safer to fight than to allow other rowdies to have free play for

pistol or for bowie. In England, however, and with Hugh Ashton, though unarmed, for an antagonist, Salem Jackson preferred not to resort to the rude arbitrament of blows.

The sailor had his bowie-knife in the weasel-skin belt that he wore beneath his blue waistcoat. But he had no pistol. His three revolvers, relics of a stormy past on the other side of the ocean, he had purposely left at Treport. He would not trust himself to carry firearms, for fear, before his treacherous work was done, the door should burst open, and he should find himself confronted by his former Captain, and only able to free himself by doing what would bring his felon neck under the immediate attention of the Newgate authorities.

He meant to succeed, this time, by fraud, but not by force, and therefore perhaps deserved to be likened rather to the fox than to the fox's lupine cousin that turns so savagely on dog and man as they follow, straggling, in the long pursuit over hill and dale. Both Sir Lucius and the Black Miller had judged rightly in selecting this man, inspired as he was by mingled hate and greed, as a worthy instrument for vile designs. Salem Jackson was strong and lithe, and had a practised cunning which had eluded deserved punishment before that day.

The habits of railway servants at small stations are so much alike, allowance being made for the coming and going of trains, that their proceedings may be predicated

with almost as much certainty as those of bees or ants. At Hollow Oak there was nothing to prevent porters or policeman from locking up the station and going off to dinner at one o'clock, the hour most congenial to themselves, and most convenient to their families. Nobody, on these occasions, was left in the station except Hugh Ashton, if he chanced to be at home, and a boy, a sort of apprentice to the guild of portership, who was called familiarly "Brooms," who drew about four-and-sixpence of weekly salary from the Company's exchequer, and who rubbed door-handles, and cleaned lamps, and wore corduroys, and was by no means the least efficient of the permanent staff there on duty.

It had been arranged that little "Brooms,"

who was the son of a widow—and, it may be said, a widow of the Company's making, since his father, a platelayer, had been killed on the line through some inattention to the switching of points—should always get such dinner as he was to have when the men came back from theirs, in order that the station might never remain absolutely ungarrisoned. And this, Salem Jackson, peering down from the edge of the fir plantation that crested the bank on the down-side of the line, was not slow to perceive. He saw the porters troop off, like schoolboys dismissed from school, and saw the green-coated policeman follow them yawningly. Hugh Ashton, he knew, was—thanks to the lying letter he had himself, at the Black Miller's suggestion, indited—

away at Bullbury. But then there was the boy.

Little Brooms, when left alone, moved for some minutes to and fro, walking the platform with an air of authority, much as some junior lieutenant in the Navy, who was a midshipman but yesterday, walks the deck as officer of the watch. He tried doors, glanced into the telegraph-room, as if to see whether anything had occurred to the instruments, and looked into the empty waiting-room and booking-office. Then he began gravely to peruse the scraps of literature gratuitously provided in the shape of large-type advertisements, and seemed absorbed in contemplation of the merits of iron bedsteads, cattle-food, mustard, and perambulators.

Salem Jackson, watching this young student from his lurking-place, waxed impatient. The minutes were flying. Was this urchin such a marvel of steadiness that he would stand sentinel until the men returned from dinner? And, if so, would it not be necessary to secure his silence by——

Ha! a change had come over young Brooms, and he had forgotten, for the moment, his position of responsibility as a railway servant, to remember that he was a boy, and strolled off to the locked carriage-gate of the station, there to indulge in a contest of repartee with other little lads of his own age, who came close to the wooden bars to banter him with rustic wit on the subject of the official cap and buttons, which

they nevertheless envied, and to ask if he was hungry. Now was the time! So good an opportunity might never recur. With a sailor's activity, Salem Jackson cleared the fence, scrambled down the bank, and darted across the line. The boy, still beside the gate, had not turned his head.

There were some crates, filled with live poultry, waiting for conveyance to London, stacked in a corner. Behind these Salem Jackson ensconced himself, while he took a closer survey of the place. What he desired to find must be looked for, he felt convinced, either in the ticket-office or in the station-master's house. The latter was the more likely of the two. But as a prudent general leaves nothing to chance,

he determined to explore the ticket-office first.

Peeping round the corner of the pile of crates, Salem Jackson looked cautiously at the boy. The boy's face was yet averted, but he seemed as though he were in the act of turning his head. Quick as thought, the ambushed lurker crept from behind the crates, and gained the waiting-room, through which he passed into the booking-office.

Once in the citadel, as it were, of the little pacific fortress that he sought to surprise, the Cornishman who had seen the world made haste to profit by the occasion. The tiny ticket-office was locked up. This was a matter of course. But the intruder's quick eye soon perceived that the stout timber

partition, painted and varnished, which shut it in, separating it from the booking-office—which also served as a waiting-room for passengers of the second and third class—did not reach the ceiling, but left, probably for ventilating purposes, a space through which a man could easily squeeze himself. To scale the wooden screen, difficult perhaps to a rustic, was to a sailor a feat that presented no difficulty, and soon Salem Jackson found himself on the inner side of the partition.

The ticket-office did not prove to contain what the Black Miller's emissary was hunting for. In a half-shut drawer were two sovereigns and some thirty shillings in silver. There were the tickets, and the stamping instruments, and some accounts

and printed forms, and a watch belonging to the clerk or head porter, and an overcoat hanging on a peg, and a few parcels in brown paper, ready for conveyance. With none of these things did Salem Jackson meddle. He was in the act of reclimbing the partition, when he heard footsteps and the sound of a young voice, and in an instant he removed his brown sinewy hands from the top of the wooden screen, and stood, motionless as a statue, on the inner ledge close to the aperture where tickets are given out and change counted, stooping his head low, lest it should be visible above the partition.

Would that boy never go? Perhaps the fire in the booking-office was an attraction, on that chilly day, compared

with which even such social intercourse as was possible through the bars of a gate had lost its charms. But, at any rate, young Brooms lingered long in front of the blazing coals, shuffling his feet as he hummed a nigger ditty picked up from some roving company of begrimed serenaders, and all this time the strong man, scarcely venturing even to glance up at the clock overhead to note the provoking flight of time, watched and waited. All unconscious was the lad of the close proximity of Salem Jackson, with his knife concealed beneath his clothes, and breathing softly in the dread of being overheard. Would the brat never go? The villain grew desperate as he saw his chance of success and safety waning. Should he spring out now, like a tiger from

the long grass of the jungle, he could readily——

Ah! Brooms, with the versatility of his age, was sauntering out at last, unwitting of the bony fingers that were preparing to clutch at his throat.

When the sound of the boy's iron-bound heels had died away in the distance, the seaman leaped noiselessly over the wooden screen, traversed the waiting-room, and, after a brief sojourn under the lee of the pile of crates, made his way to the door of the station-master's house. The door was locked.

But Salem Jackson was prepared to find it locked. Drawing from an outer pocket of his rough pea-coat a bunch of skeleton keys, such as locksmiths and

burglars use, he selected one and then another.

At the second attempt he succeeded, went in, and shut the door. There was nothing in the parlour, he found, that would serve his purpose. In Hugh's bed-room, when he reached it, he found a cupboard which was locked, but which, with slight trouble, he contrived to open. In it was a large-sized box of japanned metal, bearing the initials of the railway company, and secured by a patent padlock. The sailor shook the box, and heard the rattle of the money inside.

"Let us see, now," muttered the fellow, as he produced another and a smaller bunch of wardless master-keys, "whether the old Philadelphias won't tackle this toy from

Brummagem. I thought as much!" he added, complacently, as the lock yielded to his efforts, and he was enabled to lift the lid of the cash-box.

The sailor's eyes brightened as he saw the notes and gold within, and that the sum was larger than he had expected it to be. There were papers, too, but of these he selected but one, which he crammed hastily into his pocket, along with the bank-notes and the gold. Then he reclosed and re-locked the cash-box, replaced it in the exact situation where he had found it, and locked the cupboard.

Hugh's window had been left open. It was high above the ground, but an agile man could drop from it into the garden below, uninjured. Salem Jackson crept

downstairs, locked the door, remounted the stairs, and, emerging from the window, grasped the sill firmly, and dropped, as softly as a cat would have done, on the strip of turf below. Then he leaped the fence, climbed the paling, burst through a plantation of young trees, and, with an ugly grin of triumph, descended the bank, ran across the line, and plunged into the fir-wood, at the opposite side of which wound the Bullbury Road.

"Lifted that one's hair, I guess," snarled out the sailor, as he trudged off townwards. "I'd give a hundred dollars, I would, to see his face, presently."

But Salem Jackson had not seen another face, watching him from amidst the dark trunks of the fir plantation, as he cleared

the garden fence, nor did he hear the footsteps that seemed to echo his own as he neared the town of Bullbury.

CHAPTER IX.

A VISIT OF INSPECTION.

"YOUR accounts, Mr. Ashton, are quite correct. Nothing could be, ahem! more accurate. And now—if you have the cash ready, we will not trouble you much more."

The speaker was not Mr. Dicker, as may easily be conjectured, but Mr. Mould, the elder of the other two railway directors who accompanied their Deputy Chairman on his visit of inspection.

Mr. Mould was a thick-set, elderly, pompous-mannered man, with white whiskers, fishy eyes, a bunch of great gold seals, drab gaiters, and a remarkable resemblance to the thick short little fish called a miller's thumb. His voice was harsh but indistinct, and he lisped slightly. Mr. Mould was not popular. A warm man on 'Change, he was a cold man in private life, but, such as he was, he represented among the directors an opposition party, adverse to Mr. Dicker. The other director, whose name was Barber, and who was a little man, red-faced, and with stiff grey hair that rose, rebellious to the brush, echoed Mr. Mould's sentiments, and belonged to the opposition too.

There are two parties in every association

or assembly, public or private, as surely as night follows day, and so it was in this railway company. Mr. Dicker's wealth and energy made him all but supreme; but there were those who grudged him the fortune he had amassed, and the power he wielded, and these two, Messrs. Mould and Barber, were of the envious minority. They had listened coldly to their chief's eulogies of Hugh's courage and coolness at the time of the late accident, which had saved the company thousands of pounds in the form of costs and damages. They had been mute when Mr. Dicker spoke of preferment as a thing certain to accrue to the Hollow Oak station-master. It is for managers and chairmen to promote deserving subordinates, not for directors as

such. The station had been inspected; the accounts examined; it only remained to take over the money belonging to the Company.

Hugh went to his house, where the cash-box was kept, and returned to the waiting-room, where he had left the directors, with a white, scared face and haggard eyes.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a voice that he vainly tried to render firm, "I have been robbed! The Company's money in my possession, as the accounts prove, amounted to one hundred and ninety-three pounds, fifteen shillings. Of this sum, the greater part was in Bank of England notes, the numbers of which I have marked on this list, as you will see.

The money, as I happen to know, was safe yesterday at noon. I absented myself for three hours or so, from the station, at this our slack time, leaving the cash in the cash-box, locked in a locked cupboard in my bed-room. I left the house-door locked, and found it locked on my return. So were the cupboard and the cash-box, when I went to seek the money a few minutes since. But"—and here the young man groaned and turned away his face—"some thief has carried off every farthing there."

The directors looked at one another blankly. Then Mr. Dicker rose, and, going up to Hugh, clapped him on the shoulder in token of encouragement.

"This is a bad business," he said; "but do not take it so to heart, my young friend. No one imputes, for an instant, blame to you, and——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Dicker, sir," croaked out Mr. Mould, arching his shaggy eyebrows, and shaking his fat head: "Mr. Barber and I may not be quite certain to take so charitable, ahem! a view of what appears to us a very, ahem! awkward transaction."

"Excessively awkward, very!" chimed in red-faced Mr. Barber.

"Not, of course," resumed the senior of the two, "that we would absolutely condemn Mr. Ashton unheard——"

"Condemn!" broke in Hugh, flushing

crimson, and then growing pale again. "Can you pretend to believe, gentlemen, that I—I——"

He ceased speaking, and stood with horror in his eyes, as if for the first time he fathomed the position in which he found himself, and the suspicions under which he lay.

"I, for one," said Mr. Dicker, sturdily, "believe, from the bottom of my heart, everything that Mr. Ashton has told us. I would stake ten thousand pounds on his truth and honour, and ten thousand at the back of that, Mr. Mould! I never saw a better lad, nor a braver, and I am not going to desert him at this pinch."

But Mr. Mould appeared to have reason

on his side when he said, gruffly, that Mr. Dicker's partiality must not blind him to obvious facts. Hugh was in a place of trust. He had been appointed, it seemed, without producing testimonials or giving security. The money in his charge had disappeared, on the eve of the Directors' visit, and he had nothing to say in explanation of the disappearance. With all due deference to the Deputy Chairman, the case had an ugly look. By all means let it be investigated. So the three Directors went, in Hugh's company, to look at the cupboard, and to look at the cash-box whence the money had been abstracted. The cash-box still contained some papers, vouchers for the sum amassed by Hugh as station-master, and Mr. Dicker's letter. Then Hugh was

questioned as to the reason of his recent absence from the station. He said, frankly, that he had spent some time in Bullbury, where an anonymous letter had invited him —for a purpose which he preferred to keep private—to attend.

"But where is this letter?" asked Mr. Dicker.

Hugh could only conjecture that it had been stolen, together with the Company's cash, by the mysterious thief who had profited by his absence.

"Perhaps, Mr. Dicker," said Mr. Mould, putting his thumbs into the armholes of his waistcoat, and looking more uncompromising than ever, "you would like us to put faith in this cock-and-bull story?"

"That's just it—cock-and-bull story!"

echoed Mr. Barber, rubbing together his beefy little hands.

"I do believe it, Mr. Mould, begging your pardon, and in spite of your ill-nature!" exclaimed the Deputy Chairman, taking Hugh's hand publicly, and rapping out an oath in conclusion, which we will hope may be pardoned to the capitalist of Guildhall Chambers.

But Mr. Mould, backed by his red-faced colleague, seemed master of the situation. He had, he said, in justice to the Company, a duty to discharge, disagreeable no doubt, but which no overbearing conduct on the part of his official superior should deter him from carrying out according to his conscience. The station-master at Hollow Oak, appointed, Mr. Mould must say, in a loose

and irregular fashion, to a place of trust, had failed in that trust. He had had, by his own admission, funds in his charge. What had become of those funds? That was the question. The plain duty of the Directors was to go before the nearest county magistrate—there was Sir Henry Marsden, Chairman of Quarter-sessions, a shareholder of their own, whose house, Marsden Hall, was near—and let justice take its course.

"I'll pay the money, and be hanged to it!" said Mr. Dicker, angrily. But the other two would not hear of this.

"Felonies," said the senior, drily, "must not be compounded, even to save your young friend, Mr. Dicker."

Hugh had quite broken down. The

capitalist's kindness had unmanned him. But he dashed away the hot tears from his proud eyes, and said, quietly:

"I am at your service, gentlemen. Let us go before——"

At that moment, with rattle and roar, and the ear-piercing shriek of the steam-whistle, the day-express went thundering past, drowning Hugh's voice, and, as the iron clangour ceased, a strange hubbub and dissonance disturbed the normal stillness of the place, and up the narrow stairs, came stumbling, in their eagerness, several men. Will Farleigh it was who, flushed and panting, rushed up the first. Then followed police helmets, bright buttons, and blue uniforms. Two policemen led or dragged into the room a man

in sailor's garb, with handcuffed wrists and dejected air, like a fox that has been trapped.

"Why, Will, lad? And Jackson—a prisoner, it seems!" cried Hugh, looking to right and left.

"Yes, Captain Hugh! we've got the villain, hard and fast! Here is the thief that robbed you," said the bird-hunter, eagerly. "And here"—as one of the constables produced from his own pockets, and laid on the table, two bunches of skeleton keys, a chisel, a heap of gold and bank-notes, a letter bearing the Bullbury post-mark, and a bowie-knife of American make—"you may see what we found upon him. 'Twas Rose Trawl sent me. God granted that she should hear this hound, and a worse

than he, Captain, one Swart or Grewler, the Miller of Pen Mawth, plotting your ruin, and how to send you out of your station here—those were the scoundrel's own words—with iron bracelets on; and he had nearly succeeded, but that I was on the watch, followed him to Bullbury, and got him arrested there."

Even Mr. Mould could no longer feel or affect incredulity. There were the bank-notes, found in Salem Jackson's pocket, and endorsed by Hugh. There was the anonymous letter that had tempted Hugh over to Bullbury, and which, as a measure of precaution, the robber had carried off. Every proof was clear, and Mr. Dicker was jubilant.

"We will go before Sir Henry," he said,

with a look at Mr. Mould, "but with a different charge to make, and against a different person, gentlemen."

But the Bullbury sergeant of police, jealous for the honour of the town, intervened. The caption, he said, had been made in the borough. Sir Henry—at mention of whom he touched his helmet—was a county magistrate. Let the borough magistrates first decide whether the prisoner was to be handed over to the county jurisdiction or not. And let the prisoner be safely lodged in Bullbury Bridewell.

Salem Jackson simplified matters by his behaviour. Like most cowards, in adversity he was abject. He snivelled out contrite entreaties to be forgiven by all, and especially by Hugh, hinted darkly at his readi-

ness to denounce the Black Miller, and only checked his garrulous confession by frequent pleas to be assured of immunity from punishment as "State evidence—Queen's—as I believe you call it in the—in the dear old country, gents!" So he was removed to strong lodgings at Bullbury; and Hugh wrung Will Farleigh's hands, and asked him a thousand questions, and thanked him as his best of friends; and Mr. Dicker thanked him too; while even Mr. Mould exclaimed, stiffly:

"I am obliged to you, Mr.—aw, Fair-weather—for having prevented me from doing a great injustice.—Eh, Barber, didn't he?"

But he said it in a thick, pompous way, as though the fact of uttering those few

words implied a receipt in full to himself and to his colleague for all previous severity in judging Hugh Ashton.

Then the two Directors caused their special train to be ordered up by telegraph, from Stedham, and went off Londonwards, leaving the Deputy Chairman behind.

"I shall not leave my young friend here so soon, gentlemen both," the capitalist had said, with a cool nod.—"Good day, Mr. Mould—your servant, Mr. Barber."

Will Farleigh could not wait. A train, convenient for his return to the west, would start from Stedham at seven o'clock. And he must go to Alfringham, he said, to tell Miss Maud the result of his mission. Miss Maud, so the bird-hunter declared, had

seemed as sorry for the scrape Captain Hugh was in as himself or Rose Trawl. So Will trudged up again to Alfringham, where he found Miss Stanhope on the terrace that commanded a view of the road, eagerly awaiting him. And Maud thanked Will, and praised him, with thanks to heaven's mercy too, for Hugh's rescue from the vile schemes of vile men, and took him into the mansion, where Mrs. Stanhope saw him, and commended him too, but with a well-bred moderation in her praise. And Will, with a grateful letter, hurriedly penned, of thanks from Maud Stanhope to her best of friends, dear Rose Trawl, was sent on in one of Lord Penrith's carriages to Stedham, in good time for his train to

Cornwall. But he did not see the old lord himself, then struggling betwixt life and death.

CHAPTER X.

MR. DICKER'S DINNER.

HUGH ASHTON, left alone with Mr. Dicker, after the special train had borne off the two other railway Directors, grasped the capitalist's hand and pressed it warmly.

"Heaven reward you, dear sir!" he said, in a broken voice. "*You* believed me, when others thought me a liar and a thief.

I have known no such friend as you since my dear father died."

"It is I, my boy, who have reason to be proud of your friendship," answered Mr. Dicker, coming for once fairly off his golden pedestal, and descending to the level of common humanity. "I wish I had been your father. A son like you would have——" And the rich man sighed as he remembered that there was none to inherit his wealth save Miss Dicker—who was a plain little person, with pinkish eyes, and a resemblance to a white rabbit, overloaded with fine clothes and fine accomplishments—and whatsoever scion of needy nobility might become that young lady's husband.

"Your kindness emboldens me," said

Hugh, after a pause, "to ask a further favour at your hands. My story—the real history of my life—I have breathed to no one; and I had determined, if I died before the proofs I seek were found, that the secret itself should die with me. But now I begin to mistrust my own judgment, and should be glad of the counsel of so experienced a gentleman, as well as so true a friend——"

"As I am, eh?" chimed in the capitalist, patting Hugh gently on the shoulder. "And quite right too. It's getting dark, isn't it; and if there's an inn in the neighbourhood where they can give us something to eat and a glass of wine, we'll dine together. By Jove! but we will. Oh! the 'Beville Arms,' eh?" And the capitalist

passed his arm familiarly through Hugh's. "Then the 'Beville Arms' shall have the honour of providing for a hungry customer. This sort of thing makes me ravenous. And you, Mr. Edmunds, or whatever it is, will please to look to the station; and you and the others can drink Mr. Ashton's health, at proper time and place, with this five-pound note. Now come along, and I won't hear a word, mind, till dinner's on the table!"

The "Beville Arms," gaining from the tattle of the porters some inkling of the wealth and commercial standing of its unexpected customer, exerted itself to content the fastidious palate of a Londoner. Somehow, there was a fish, and a chicken, and a pudding added to the chop and steak which

were all that the local butcher could supply; while the landlord, who had been a servant at Alfringham once upon a time, unearthed a bottle of such green-sealed sherry as he kept for rare occasions, as when some belated fox-hunter slept at Hollow Oak.

"It's not half bad!" said Mr. Dicker, critically, of the wine; "but I'll give you, one of these days, some Amontillado, which couldn't be bought, sir, couldn't be bought. It was a present, when the Aranjuez Junction was planned, from the Infante ——. Never mind that! I want to hear your story, my poor boy."

"In the first place," said Hugh, with a forced smile, "I have to begin with a sort of confession, Mr. Dicker. I fly, as we

sailors say, false colours at the main. My real name is Hugh—but not Hugh Ashton.

"Dear me!" returned the capitalist, really interested.

"It is from no mean motive, heaven knows!" went on Hugh, "that I have consented to disguise my identity, and to bear the humble name by which I have for years been known. My poor father—who died in helping to save lives in a boat-accident in Wales, last summer—was a man of rank and family, who lay for weary years under a foul and hideous charge—as false as it was cruel—that of fratricide—of the murder of Marmaduke Beville—his own brother."

"Beville! your father! Surely he could not have been the Honourable George Beville, second son——" exclaimed the capitalist, breathlessly.

"Second son, Mr. Dicker," said Hugh, quietly, "of the present Lord Penrith, of Alfringham, close to this place. I saw my grandfather, for the first time, when the railway accident occurred, the other day. Yes; my name is Hugh Beville—not Ashton—and these papers," he added, as he drew from an inner breast-pocket of the coat he wore a large pocket-book of black leather, opened it, and laid it on the table before Mr. Dicker—"these papers will prove that my words are true. Here is the marriage certificate of the Hon. George Beville's

marriage to Letitia Ashton, at the chapel of the English Embassy in Paris. Here is my own certificate of birth and baptism, dated, as you will see, from Sydney, Australia. And here are letters——"

"But, my dear young friend!" said Mr. Dicker, jumping excitedly to his feet, "are you aware of two things? First, that you are heir to one of the oldest titles, and one of the greatest territorial fortunes, as well as the future head of one of our most ancient families in England. And, secondly, that you are the son of my kindest friend, of the man who lent me a helping hand at the most critical moment of my fortunes; for, without the two thousand pounds he lent me—and which, in fact, I owe still!—I should never have been a

partner in the house of Isaacson, Jellerby, and Dicker, of which I am now sole representative!"

Mr. Dicker's excitement seemed contagious.

"Can it be possible," exclaimed Hugh, springing up, "that you have been my father's friend as well as mine? And, if so, is it in your power to assist me in the task to which, beside his grave, I solemnly devoted myself, that of clearing his dear name from the base aspersions of a heartless world? Because, Mr. Dicker, so long as George Beville is deemed the murderer of his brother, Hugh Beville chooses to remain as he has hitherto done, plain Hugh Ashton, and to earn his bread by the labour of his own hands. And no temptation of

rank or fortune would avail to change a resolve deliberately made, and steadfastly adhered to. Even love itself could not do that."

"You mean," inquired the capitalist, who could scarcely credit himself with having heard aright, "that you will not claim your rights as Lord Penrith's heir, unless he do justice to your father's memory?"

"That was the meaning I intended to convey," answered the young man. "Until my father's innocence is acknowledged, I, for my part, will not count kinship with those who drove him out, like Cain, into the wilderness."

Mr. Dicker reseated himself, and eyed Hugh very much as he had eyed him, in

Guildhall Chambers, at the time of his refusal of the cheque.

"Upon my word," said the man of money, wonderingly, "you are a very extraordinary young man. But I like you the better for it. I felt from the first that you reminded me of some one, and now I look at you I see the likeness, and yet the difference. Your poor father had a thoughtful look and a retiring manner. Well, it so happens that I can, in my turn, hold out a helping hand to the son of my former benefactor. Sit down again, and fill your glass, and I will tell you how. I need not explain how first by accident—a lucky accident for me—I made acquaintance with Mr. George Beville. I was then a

poor and struggling man, and the money that he lent me—it had been part of his mother's fortune—gave me my first decided lift in the world, converting me from a clerk into a partner. I prospered so well that in two years or so I should have been able to repay the debt, when suddenly came the rumour that Lord Penrith's eldest son had been shot dead, and that his brother had fled the country rather than stand his trial for the act. I never, for a moment, believed your father guilty."

"You did not!" rejoined Hugh, with a bright gleam of pleasure on his face.

"No; because I knew him well, and could conceive," resumed the capitalist, "how his gentle nature would have shrunk,

too sensitively, perhaps, from the publicity of a trial in open court, and from the suspicious and callous curiosity of a crowd intent on being cheaply amused. And the circumstantial evidence, they said, was strong. Innocent men have been condemned ere this. At any rate, I thought I could understand the motives that prompted him to keep away, and I tried more than once to discover his address, and assure him of my regard; but in vain. What I never did comprehend was the reason of his doubly unfortunate absence at the very date of the murder."

"These letters," said Hugh, offering them, "will explain that. They are from my mother, written while she was still Miss Ashton, and under a secret engagement to

marry my father, who dared not, for fear of his father's prejudices and violence of temper, openly mention his attachment to an orphan girl without pedigree or fortune. It was a stolen match after all. My mother was induced to go over to Paris under escort of the old aunt with whom she lived, there to be privately married; and my father started to meet her in France, as ill-luck would have it, on the very afternoon that witnessed his brother's murder. He wrote to inform his father of this; but the old lord was angry and unjust, so that he destroyed the letter half read, and answered it with a malediction."

Mr. Dicker took out his memorandum-book, and pencilled down a note or two.

"My poor friend left England, then, or, at any rate, started from Alfringham, in the afternoon of the very day of the murder. That, in itself, should almost substantiate an alibi, coupled with the intention of going abroad, which these letters,—yes, yes; post-marks and signatures well preserved, I see —establish."

Hugh shook his head.

"My father always told me," he said, sadly, "that he could not prove his innocence thus. He left his brother Marmaduke near the garden gate of the steward's house, and himself went by a footpath across the fields to Bromley Common, and so into the Stedham Road. At Stedham he procured a carriage and post-horses, and thus travelled to Southampton, whence he pursued his

journey by railway to London and Dover. But he must still have been walking towards Stedham when my uncle Marmaduke was found dead near Lambert's Stile, close to the Bullbury Road. Then, too, the pistol which was found in the snow, close to the place where the murder was done, had been mislaid, or stolen from the house, a day or two before; but unhappily my father had not mentioned its loss to anyone."

"That's bad," rejoined the capitalist. "But I hope we shall be able to prove that the fatal bullet was fired, not, as was assumed, from a pistol at all, but from a gun, and that the pistol was left on the ground for the purpose of directing suspicion to its owner, George Beville. Now listen to me!

That poor fellow Purkiss, who perished in the shipwreck, as you remember, had special instructions from me to make inquiries, while in Australia, for George Beville's place of abode. In this he failed; but, strange to say, a man whom he befriended in Queensland, a poor wretch who had been waiter in a tavern, and was ill and poor, and whose last hours my clerk's good-nature rendered comfortable, dictated and signed a confession which Purkiss took down in writing, and which was among those valuable papers that were in the purple bag, and which you saved while rendering what assistance was possible on the night of the shipwreck. The man's name, as I recollect, was Cooper—it is a common name, I am told, among the gip-

sies, and he was himself of gipsy blood—and he had emigrated, been gold-digger, stockman, and shepherd, by turns, lost his health, and finally did not wish to die with the load of an undivulged secret on his conscience. Yes; his name was Cooper, and the usual camping-places of his tribe in or near this part of the Forest. He solemnly affirmed George Beville's absolute innocence of the crime imputed to him, declaring that he and a sister of his, Anne or Nan Cooper—better known as Gipsy or Ghost Nan—— Why, you seem to know the name?" said the capitalist.

"I know the name, and the woman. But, for heaven's sake, go on!" answered Hugh.

"Where was I?" said Mr. Dicker. "Oh,

yes; that he and a sister of his, bearing that name, were actually eye-witnesses of Marmaduke Beville's murder, being at that time encamped beside a hedge bordering the field in which the crime was committed, and that the deed was done by one James Grewler, the steward of Lord Penrith's estate, and a man in whom your grandfather reposed unbounded trust, and that the weapon used was a valuable gun, of somewhat remarkable construction for those days, which had been a present from Lord Penrith himself."

"But why——" began Hugh, bewildered.

"Why, you will say," went on the capitalist, "did not the gipsies come forward to denounce the criminal, and save

the reputation of an innocent man? But you must remember that these wanderers are at war with Society, and that it would take a strong motive to induce them to give evidence in a court of law, or aid the Justice they deem hostile to themselves. Then —if I recollect rightly—this Grewler had a hold on them, knowing of some poaching or petty depredations that the gang had committed; while, lastly, Cooper admitted having received hush-money, though to no great amount, from the steward, who afterwards, it appeared, absconded with a large sum of money belonging to Lord Penrith."

"Why, then, may I ask, dear friend, did you——" Hugh began; but again the capitalist anticipated him.

"Why did I not, on receiving these papers from Australia which your courage preserved, make public the gipsy's statement, and clear your father's name? I answer—For two reasons. Cooper himself exacted a pledge from my clerk—of which, with some outline of the story, poor Purkiss informed me by mail—that old Lord Penrith should not hear the truth unless George Beville, or his innocent children, should prove to be alive to profit by it. I fancy the gipsy apprehended that some legal punishment might befall his sister, this Nan, or Nana, as he called her, of whom he seemed to stand in superstitious awe. And then, what proof had I that George Beville was alive? I knew that advertisements had been inserted, years ago, in the colonial

newspapers, making inquiries about him, but fruitlessly. I will, however, telegraph forthwith to London to one of my people, and have the box that contains the confession brought to Hollow Oak to-morrow by the earliest train. Then we can go before Sir Henry, or any other justice of the peace, with a story worth the telling."

The telegram was duly despatched; but there was still much to say and to arrange, and it was late before Hugh and Mr. Dicker separated, the latter to commit himself to the lavender-scented sheets of the best bedroom at the village inn; the former to pass but broken slumbers, as may be guessed, while eagerly awaiting the morrow.

CHAPTER XI.

BEFORE THE MAGISTRATE.

"VERY well, Mr. Linklater," said the capitalist to the confidential clerk, who, coming down by the earliest train that started in the grey dawning, alighted at Hollow Oak with the deed-box, lacquered, patent-locked, and with hinges of extra strength, in his careful custody; "I am obliged by your punctuality. You had better stay, though. We are going, this

gentleman and myself"—pointing out Hugh —"before a magistrate, and you might as well be present as an extra witness."

Mr. Linklater, one of those tall, gaunt Aberdonians whom the City of Granite sends out to do hard work and win hard cash by willing labour, was at his chief's disposal, of course. But he looked with no trifling perplexity from his employer to the young station-master, and back again, as if marvelling what connection there could be between scrip, shares, and discount, which formed the current grist to the mill at Guildhall Chambers, and country magistrates, Hollow Oak Station, and Hugh, the master of that station.

But Mr. Linklater, whose previous civic experiences had been eminently unromantic,

and who knew more of tare and tret, of agios, caravan, commission, bulk-breaking, and other miscellaneous items of commerce, than he did of the real flesh-and-blood world outside the doors of a counting-house, had soon further cause for wonder. For into the station glided, ghost-like, the wasted form and weird face of Gipsy Nan, draped, it is true, in squalid garments, quite unlike the picturesque attire of her kindred in Spain or the East, but wearing them with a savage dignity such as would have beseemed a prophetess of some barbarian race. She walked direct towards Hugh Ashton.

"Follow me," said the gipsy, boldly, "son of the Red Hand, for I am come to wash the stain of blood away! I saw

the shot fired, I saw the man stagger, and put his hand to his side, and turn his face fronting his enemy, as a wounded stag turns on the dogs, and then fall. He tried to speak, but the blood ebbed fast, and the life with it, and he did not frame a word. But he is living yet who fired the gun. Ha! it will be a brave show when they bring James Grewler back in chains to Alfringham—a braver when he hangs within the jail walls of Dorchester. Now I am ready, if you will, to go before your judge!"

At another time, Mr. Dicker would have proved no patient listener to Gipsy Nan's tirade. But now he welcomed the woman's wild words, as lending valuable confirmation to the story which he and Hugh had to

tell. The capitalist could not doubt that in Ghost Nan he saw the surviving sister of the gipsy emigrant who had died in Australia. Half-crazed she certainly seemed to be, and there were doubts as to how far her testimony would be respected at the Central Criminal Court. But, if she were not held a credible witness in the prosecution of Marmaduke Beville's real murderer, at any rate her evidence was worth having on behalf of George, his dead brother.

"Get her into the fly; it is waiting at the 'Beville Arms' by this time," whispered the capitalist to Hugh; "and hold her there, by force, if necessary, till we get to Marsden Hall. What should I have said, a week ago, if I had been told that I should

alight at the door of a country gentleman, and one of our shareholders, in company with a half-mad gipsy beggar-woman like this!"

Sir Henry Marsden, chairman, as Mr. Mould the director had truly said, of some sessions, petty or quarter, within the shire of Dorset, was an active magistrate, and perhaps as favourable a specimen of Her Majesty's justices of the peace as it was possible to light upon. It might truly be said of him that he was an estated gentleman and a baronet if you please, but a magistrate before all things.

His estate bordered on that of Lord Penrith, and would have seemed more considerable had he not had a lord for his immediate neighbour. He had been in-

vited to contest the county in Parliament. But he thought little of the extent of his acres, and less of the chance of recording a silent vote at divisions, in comparison with his reputation for being able and upright on the Bench. There were barristers now and then in the modest court over which he presided who were irreverent enough to express the wish that all our legal bigwigs had the sense and patience of Sir Henry Marsden.

It was perhaps lucky that Sir Henry was the magistrate referred to. An ordinary squire might have been dull and helpless. A clerical justice, or some retired admiral, pitchforked into the commission of the peace, would have boggled over every detail. But the baronet gave the whole case

his best and most courteous attention, and such questions as he asked were thoroughly to the purpose.

By good fortune the clerk to the magistrates was in the house, having come over to Marsden Hall on county business, and Gipsy Nan was persuaded to make her affidavit with tolerable coherence. There could be no reasonable doubt that the Nan, Nana, or Anne Cooper mentioned in the gipsy emigrant's death-bed deposition in Australia was the same person as the vagrant then present. As little doubt could there exist that the employer of Salem Jackson, in his treacherous theft of the Company's cash-box at Hollow Oak, was the false steward who had plundered Lord

Penrith, and the real assassin of Marmaduke Beville.

"We will get this sailor-fellow—this Jackson," said Sir Henry, confidentially, to Mr. Dicker, whom he well knew by reputation, "immediately transferred from the care of the borough to the county police, and I will make a point of seeing him before I sleep. From what you tell me, I feel sure that he will save himself by revealing all he knows; and I feel equally sure of the identity of this Swart, the Miller of Pen Mawth, in Cornwall, with the James Grewler who was steward when I was a lad at Alfringham, and who made off with a great sum of my lord's money. Yes, yes; there had been two generations of the

Grewlers stewards before him; and this young James had been sent to the university at Lord Penrith's expense, for he was a good scholar; but he came away in disgrace, and his father was glad to get him made steward in his stead, here. The very year after the murder old Thomas Grewler died, and this precious son of his levanted with a large sum. I thought he was dead. But I hope to see him committed yet for trial at the assizes."

"Shall we hang him—the Miller, I mean?" asked Mr. Dicker, in a low tone, of the magistrate.

"I'm very much afraid not," answered Sir Henry, with a smile. "I am speaking now, of course, as a private person; but, in my opinion, the scoundrel will save that

ugly neck of his. Juries, you see, are squeamish. The thing happened long ago. This queer woman"—dropping his voice still lower—"is not to be relied upon. Any clever counsel for the defence could play the bear with her evidence. She has sworn to her brother's handwriting, and sworn to her own deposition; but I doubt whether twelve men in a box would believe her in a matter of life and death. And she may never appear at the assizes. Why she came now, as a volunteer, it is hard to say; but perhaps she scented out, through some secret channel of information, what was on foot, and chose to have a finger in the pie. But if the miller of to-day, and faithless steward of a quarter of a century back, escapes penal servitude for the

rest of his rascally life, call me a false prophet."

Towards Hugh the magistrate was not only courteous but kind.

"Allow me, Mr. Hugh Beville," he said, taking his hand, "to be the first of your neighbours to welcome you, and to greet you by your own name. There is an old friendship between our families; and I knew your father, and your uncle too, poor fellow, in my young days."

One duty, which could not well be deputed to a more appropriate person, Sir Henry undertook to discharge He offered to go in person to Alfringham, without delay, taking with him the proofs of Hugh's descent, and of George Beville's innocence,

and there, through Mrs. Stanhope's intermediation, to break the news to the old lord.

"You should pity him—your grandfather, I mean—Mr. Beville," said Sir Henry Marsden, as he ordered round his carriage, having first, but vainly, pressed his hospitality on the unexpected visitors. "We, who live near, have seen the canker of that mistaken belief poison his whole life."

"I do pity him," answered Hugh, in softened tones, "from my very heart."

Then Sir Henry, with all the papers in his possession, drove off to Alfringham, promising that on the morrow warrants should be issued, which, duly endorsed by

the authorities of the county of Cornwall, would authorize the arrest of the Black Miller.

Nan stalked off, ghost-like, towards the Forest, disregarding alike Hugh's thanks and Mr. Dicker's offers of money; and so soon as the fly from the "Beville Arms" had jolted back to Hollow Oak, Mr. Dicker took a kind farewell of Hugh, and went back, by the next up-train, to London, accompanied by his clerk. How strange it was to Hugh to find himself back at his little station, and to continue to perform his duties of routine, while his brain was in a whirl of excitement; and when he remembered that into the last few hours had been crowded more of stirring news than most of us hear in a lifetime. But his

work, he felt, was not yet done until the murderer of his uncle had been dragged into the light of day.

CHAPTER XII.

LORD PENRITH DIES.

LEFT alone once more at Hollow Oak Station, Hugh began almost to doubt whether the events of the last two days were not merely the idle fancies of a dreamer's brain. So rapidly had one surprise succeeded to another that a sense of unreality attached even to the recent vindication of his father's name. Hugh felt what we all feel when some goal to attain to

which we have striven long is reached at last—a startling contrast between the marvellous ease with which success is grasped, and the painful efforts and anguish of hope deferred that preceded the final triumph. Not that in Hugh's case the success was even yet certain. His grandfather's prejudiced resentment against the son he had cast off might be impregnable to proof or reason, and Sir Henry's kindly mission prove a failure.

It would be hard if justice should not be rendered at the last to George Beville's memory by the father whose good opinion he had desired so ardently to regain, and if Lord Penrith should choose to go out of the world without a gentle thought or fond word for the son who had

passed his life in unmerited want and disgrace.

Hours passed, and no tidings came. Hugh went about his duties as usual; but for once he performed them with a cold, mechanical precision, as a sleep-walker might have done. The porters collected in little knots, whispering to one another, and throwing sidelong glances at their official superior. Rumour is many-tongued, even at such places as Hollow Oak, and it was partly guessed, and partly known, that a great change was imminent in Hugh's fortunes. It was the dejection of his attitude, and the anxious look which he could not conceal, that perplexed the men who watched him, wondering that sudden prosperity should bring with it so little joy. It was

dusk already, and would soon be night, when through the gloom of the winter evening flashed the bright lamps of a carriage. It was an Alfringham carriage, and out of it sprang Dr. Bland.

"Mr. Ashton—Mr. Beville, rather," said the doctor, eagerly, "I have come, at Lord Penrith's urgent wish, to ask you, to implore you to come to him at once. I have a note too—here it is—from Mrs. Stanhope, begging you to lose no time. Delay may be dangerous. I will not disguise from you that my noble patient is sinking fast. He cannot, humanly speaking, live through the night. And he cannot die in peace—these are his own words—till he has been reconciled to George Beville's son."

"I will go," answered Hugh, with emo-

tion. "Yesterday, I must have refused. To-day, I can cross the threshold of my grandfather's house with no feeling of anger or of shame."

A minute more, and the carriage had rolled swiftly off towards Alfringham, with Hugh and the doctor.

"Is recovery or any improvement in his condition impossible?" asked the former, as they sped onwards.

"Quite impossible," answered Dr. Bland, more decisively than physicians can usually be brought to speak. "For days it has been evident that his lordship's life hung by a thread; and the emotion caused by the news Sir Henry brought, gently as it was communicated to him by his sister, caused a syncope that lasted long, and

which I feared would be fatal. His mind is clear now, and he has rallied somewhat; but I am convinced that it is but the last flicker of expiring vitality. My lord holds on to life for but one object now."

The remainder of the short drive was passed in silence.

Alfringham at last! and the sound of the wished-for wheels had clearly been anxiously awaited, so promptly were the wide doors flung open, to reveal the lighted entrance-hall within. Hugh, guided by Dr. Bland, entered, still feeling as though all around him stretched a dream-world, shadowy and unreal. He scarcely saw the marble columns, the polished floor, the gleam of statues, or the array of liveried servants to left and right, bowing their

powdered heads in deference to him who, in an hour's time, perhaps, might be the lord of Alfringham.

All seemed real enough, however, though the reality was a strange and sad one, when, after traversing a portion of the great house, Hugh found himself inducted into the stately chamber in which the aged master of so much that the world covets—of rank, fortune, splendour, and power—had laid him down to die. Mrs. Stanhope was there, and so was Maud, and both greeted Hugh as he came in, but silently and, as it were, timidly. All appeared to feel the involuntary awe that impresses itself on even the most frivolous when Azraël, the Angel of Death, spreads his sable wings above the house of the living.

There was a solemn hush in the old lord's room. Even the feeble ticking of the French clock on the massy chimney-piece, even the feebler tinkle of the charred embers as they dropped, ruby-red, from the half-consumed logs blazing on the hearth, could be heard with a painful distinctness. Many waxlights were burning, and the curtains of the great bed, carved and gilded, were drawn back, so that the face of the old lord, almost as white as were the pillows on which it rested, could be plainly seen.

The first to break the oppressive silence was the dying man.

"Stand nearer—nearer to me, yet—Hugh Beville!" he said, in a thin, weak voice, but with an ineffectual attempt to

raise himself. "I am glad that you have come, boy—come to forgive the old man, before he goes. I—did your—father—cruel injustice, and——"

Here his voice failed him, and he fainted; and they feared that he was dead, and crowded closer to the bed, while Dr. Bland made haste to apply remedies. With some difficulty the old lord was enabled to swallow a few drops of the cordial that the physician had poured out, and, as his eyes slowly unclosed themselves, they lit on Hugh's face.

"I was not mistaken, then, as to the likeness," muttered Lord Penrith, feebly. "I thought, at the station, that it was a spirit come—to haunt me—the spirit of my poor wronged boy—but I know better now.

You are very like your father, Hugh. He would have forgiven me, I know. Can you do it?"

"Indeed, my lord, I can," answered Hugh, in a softened voice, as he knelt down beside the bed, and took the wan weak hand of the aged lord in his. "But, in truth, there is nothing to forgive, only a sad mistake, and a sad estrangement, though my father never spoke of you to me otherwise than with affection and respect."

"Poor George! poor George!" muttered the old peer, as he looked long and fixedly, regretfully as it seemed, at Hugh's handsome, sun-bronzed face and manly bearing.

His conscience, lulled to rest through many years by the dogged conviction that

he was right in his harsh judgment of the despised and discarded younger son, was painfully awake now, and perhaps he saw George Beville's gentle goodness of character in a clearer light than ever he had done before the family tragedy had been played out to the bitter end.

There was something touching in the very earnestness with which the noble owner of Alfringham pleaded for pardon—for pardon from the grandson who had grown up as a stranger, amidst toil and adventure, in climes far remote. Lord Penrith had so wrapped and draped himself, through a long lifetime, in the mantle of his pride, that to see him cast it from him at last might have melted a sterner heart than that of Hugh Beville.

"My poor banished boy—I wish I could have seen him once again, on this side of the grave," said the old man, after a pause. "But you err, Hugh, when you say there is nothing to forgive. May Heaven do so. I was wrong. I was unjust. My wrath blinded me. I would listen to no argument —no plea. And all the time I was a dupe. The knave who ate my bread, and rewarded my trust by treachery, he it was who spilled the dear blood of my murdered Marmaduke. Sir Henry Marsden tells me that Grewler is to be hunted down at once."

"The man will be made to answer for his crimes, no doubt," replied Hugh, gently.

"Do not spare him!" exclaimed Lord

Penrith, with a spark of the fierce energy he had shown in his youth; but then his restless gaze, as it wandered about the room, fell on Maud's beautiful face, and his mood seemed to change. "I had forgotten," he said, almost humbly. "You too, Maud, my dear, have something for which to blame your old uncle. You will be no heiress, now, dear. Alfringham cannot be yours, as I intended."

"That will not make me unhappy, dear uncle, believe me," answered Maud, bending over the dying man as he lay. "I should have prized it only as your gift."

"And," said Hugh, looking up, as he knelt beside the bed, "if my cousin—I may call her so to-day—will accept my heart

and my love, that have been hers since first we met beside the Welsh lake, and Alfringham along with them, I shall be prouder and happier than ever, in my brightest day-dreams, I dared to picture myself."

Maud did not speak. All she did was to turn her blushing face shyly towards Hugh, and a glorious smile broke forth, for one instant, through her tears. For an instant only, for then she hid her face in her hands, and wept afresh, while her mother, with fond words of endearment, folded her in her arms.

"You love her, you say? You would marry her?" asked the old lord, eagerly. "Do you know, boy, that in taking her as your wife, you wed no heiress, but a girl,

well born, but almost penniless; that not the Penrith coronet only, but Alfringham and all its lands, are your very own; and that you will be, as soon as I am dead, undisputed master here? Do you still wish, knowing this, to marry my niece?"

"I have only one answer to make," said Hugh, simply; "I love Maud—Miss Stanhope I have always loved, but it was from afar off, as a man might love a star in the heaven above him." And then he approached the weeping girl, and took her unresisting hand. "Can you care for me, dearest," he asked of her, "rough and plain of speech as I am?"

Then Maud, allowing her hand to rest in Hugh's hand, made answer in her turn, falteringly, but distinctly enough for her

low accents to reach the ear of the dying man:

"Yes, my love! my love! I can care for you; *have* cared for you from the first, from the first!"

And then she hid her head, sobbing, on her mother's shoulder; and Mrs. Stanhope, weeping from mingled sympathy with her daughter and grief for her brother's loss, held out her hand to Hugh.

All had forgotten Dr. Bland, who now glided quietly up to the bed, and administered to his noble patient a few more drops of the cordial. The old lord's failing strength revived a little as he lay helplessly back among his soft pillows.

"That is well," murmured Lord Penrith,

looking alternately at the two fair young faces before him. "You, my grandson, could not have a sweeter, truer wife than dear Maud Stanhope, and I have lived to learn that my poor George's son is a worthier lord of Alfringham than—— Never mind that. Hugh looks every inch of a Beville. I don't care a straw for the rest. But, don't you think, Julia"—this was addressed to his sister, and the speaker's mind seemed to have wandered away, as the minds of the dying often do, far from the dread threshold that must so soon be crossed, far from the vague terror that guards the frontiers of the unseen world, to trivial matters which have to do with this one—"don't you think, Julia," continued the old lord, in his thin reedy

voice, "that Hugh is the image of old Sir Beville Beville, whose picture hangs on the right-hand side of the gallery, between Queen Mary and Villiers, Duke of Buckingham? I never thought that George looked like that, and yet the two are so much alike. But I am glad the boy came—home."

Home! It was with unaccustomed tears in his eyes, with an unaccustomed tightening of the muscles of his throat, such as grief brings to a strong man used to play his part manfully in a world of hard knocks and scant favour, that Hugh listened to the old lord's words. There had been a pathos in the last sentence which had dropped from those dying lips, that had rarely spoken but to threaten or command, that told how

different old Marmaduke, Baron Penrith, might have been, had his surroundings been different, had his second son but possessed, with his own gentle purity of soul, the steady fearlessness of Hugh's more self-reliant nature. But it was too late for that now.

"Kiss me, Julia!" said the old lord, feebly; and his weeping sister bent to touch his pallid cheek with her lips. "My will provides yet for you, my dear," he added, trying to pat her cheek, with that contemptuous kindness which may through life co-exist with a sincere affection; "and you'll have a better fellow for a son-in-law than that coxcomb Lucius. Where's Maud? Let her kiss me too! I meant Alfringham to go to Maud; but it's all for the best—

the best! Dr. Bland, I have been, like some old king, an unconscionable time in dying, but I must ask you to excuse—— And Hugh? Not gone! Take me by the hand, boy. I feel as if, while I hold to that strong hand of yours, I hold to life. I wish poor George were here!"

It really did seem as though old Lord Penrith did hold on to life through the grasp which his feeble fingers kept of Hugh's strong right hand; and to the last the old lord strained his failing eyes to distinguish the bold, handsome features of the gallant young man who was to be his heir, and whom he acknowledged to be a fitting representative of the ancient stock of which he came. Then, suddenly, Hugh felt the pressure of the weak fingers that

clung to his, relax. With a smile upon his face—happier, it well may be, than he had been for five and twenty weary years—Lord Penrith had sunk back, and, without a struggle, died. Then Maud and her mother, weeping, were led away; and Hugh, too, slowly and sadly went, leaving the room to the solemn hush of death.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MILL OF DEATH.

RAIN, rain, and always rain, ever and always. It rained in Cornwall as if it had never rained before, fiercely, incessantly, as if of storm and evil weather there should be no end. It is, no doubt, quite a mistaken impression on the popular mind which attributes eternal rain, as one of its abiding features, to the ancient realm of King Mark the Luckless. There are bright

sunny days on that rock-cradled promontory, when the coy scent of the golden gorse-flower mingles with the perfume of the shy myrtle, and when Cornwall seems dry enough. But, when it rains, the Cornish rain is very real, pitiless, and persistent, and so it was just then; while in Dorsetshire and Hampshire the light hoar-frost of winter was silvering the grass blades.

But if the rain that beat against the window-panes of old Captain Job Trawl, sick now, and bedridden, in the low-lying outskirts of Treport, was heavy and continual, fiercer still was its beating upon the slated roof of the Mawth Mill, and on the lofty table-land of which the Mawth Mill occupied the highest angle. High above,

at the head of the glen, loomed aloft, over the ruined castle of the Montmorts, and over the Mill that had been an engine of their tyranny, the shapeless, ungainly mass of the one mountain in the district, grim and gaunt Pen Mawth, where the rocks cropped barely out from the thin soil.

The Mill could work no more. The great wheel, with its weighty float-boards, was chained up now, and protected, so far as was possible, against the fury of the downward current, by hoardings of stout timber hurriedly put up; while every sluice and flood-gate had been opened to the fullest pitch, to let the rushing torrent go free into the lower stream that brawled on towards Tregunnow. The men in the employment of the Black Miller came up still

from their hamlet in the dell, timidly to take the orders of their brute master, as once their forefathers had crept to the Norman baron's gate to learn the pleasure of the feudal lord who had his hired horsemen in leash, ready to let slip, like bloodhounds, against those who angered him.

Ralph Swart, in these latter days, appeared more self-willed and more morose than ever he had been before. He drank deeply, in solitude, as it was his nature to drink; and on the few occasions on which he appeared in public, his dusky face was empurpled by the effects of strong liquor, and his speech thicker than usual, if equally decided and imperious.

"Word and blow, Master Swart's worse

than custom is!" said the much-enduring peasants who had to deal with the terror of the country-side, and whose habitual turn of mind was quite unlike that of the bolder and bluffer population of the coast. Jan Pennant, the fisherman, would not have cowered before even Ralph Swart as he did before his terrible creditor, the Jowder, frail, physically, but armed cap-à-pie in the strong armour of money.

Yes, it roared, the rushing stream that had its birth on the crest of heath-clad, shapeless Pen Mawth, and gurgled through the deep ravine, burst out, brattling over the stones in the rolling upland beyond, and then swirled on past the rocky platform on which stood Tregunnow Churchtown. The low-lying meadows, between

that ugly water-shed and the coast, had been swamped for weeks past. Boats, had there been any boats, would have supplied the best means of communication between some of the inland villages. Cattle had been drowned, bridges washed from their piers, sheep had perished helplessly, and ricks had been floated off, and still the rain fell. It was a wetter winter than any Yule-tide of all the years since Ralph Swart had been the tenant of the Mawth Mill. Little recked the Black Miller of the rain. If he remembered it, it was with anathemas against the stoppage of his mill, and the cost which the repairs entailed on him. No reasonable precaution did he neglect; but the men who worked for him—hired from Tregunnow and other places near—plied

saw and adze, and hammer and spike-nail, and spade and pick, as they would never have plied them for my lord or Sir John, with all the liberal flow of ale from the Hall's buttery-hatch to stimulate their efforts. And they would turn to and fro in their horny palms the money Ralph Swart paid them, and breathe on it for luck, and feel uncomfortable as they thrust it into their pockets at last.

What cared the Black Miller for rain or lowering skies! The storms that lashed his house, and raged about his glen, and stripped the thin coating of peat from the slippery stones of the hill above, were to him sources of trifling annoyance. What really seemed to pre-occupy Ralph Swart was the non-arrival of some letter which

surely ought to have reached him ere this, and in quest of which he visited Tregunnow so often and so scowlingly that the timid post-mistress, as she looked up from her sorting to say "Nothing to-day, Mr. Swart," felt it as a relief when the retiring tramp of heavy boots told that the man had withdrawn his big presence from the narrow office. He was much in Tregunnow just then, was Ralph Swart, always in public-houses, drinking deep, but convivial never; and either a stealthy listener to other men's talk, or engaged in the perusal of the beer-stained and dog's-eared country newspapers that littered the tables of bar and tap-room.

It roared, the stream, as it came down, flinging high the sudden jets of wild foun-

tains into the air, as the rushing water spouted forth from among the boulders that blocked its course, climbing farther and farther up the rocky gorge, sending heaps of white froth across the black depths of the mill-dam, and encroaching hourly on croft and pasture, as the sea, in some counties, wins roods and acres from the land. Higher up than the mill, far up the humpbacked height of dark and shapeless Pen Mawth, the few hinds, who earned their bread by toiling there, whispered one to another, as they trudged back from their work, or at the doors of the red-brick Shiloh or Ebenezer that they attended for the sake of stinging sermons, hymn-singing, and spiritual excitement, how very bad things looked. Nathan's field of oats was a

part of the swamp now, and had moved off, bodily, with the moving peat and turbid water. Farmer Bloss had lost two stacks, sucked down by the quagmire that had swallowed half a score of strayed sheep on Monday last. There was more mud than Swedish turnips on Mr. Dean's ten-acre patch. The black tarn at the top of the hill was seething as if a mighty fire burned below, and the foam and foul bubbles overflowed even to the naked stones and furze beyond.

In the hamlet that sheltered the handful of adult labouring men, descendants of those whom the Montmorts had conquered and enslaved so long ago, who yet clung to the old place, and yet earned a frugal livelihood from the barren soil, there was much

doubt as to whether Ralph Swart the miller "ought to be told" of the danger he ran in obstinately holding on to perhaps the most exposed position for miles around. The women were for leaving the "foreigner," who had been a quarter of a century resident there, to shift for himself. Ralph Swart's manners were not calculated to endear him to the gentler sex. But the men had less easy consciences, and, after much growling over the tobacco-pipes, a sort of gruff remonstrance was made with the Black Miller on the score of his persistent solitary residence in the flooded glen in such weather.

Ralph Swart was not drunk—he was never that—but inflamed and quarrelsome with drink when the deputation reached

him, towards sundown. It was long remembered how the Black Miller had stood on his doorstep with the orange gleam of the setting sun falling in unwholesome lustre on his swarthy face and harsh lineaments, as he railed at the officious cowardice of those who came to utter a reluctant word of well-meant warning.

"Pack of meddlers!" he had said, savagely, "pack of croaking crows! Be off, fools! and may your black tarn smother your own thick skulls and lazy bodies—ye whey-faced curs! Take that for your pains, neighbours!" And with that he slammed the door, and drew bolt, and set bar, regardless of wailing wind and beating rain as he was of the well-intended advice of those who dwelt near him.

That night every inhabitant of Mawth hamlet was awakened by a roar and a crash, as though the great sea itself, bursting its barriers, had made its resistless way inland. There was rattling of loose rocks, and the crash and fall of masonry, and the snapping of tree-trunks too weak to bear the pressure laid on them. And amidst the fiendish uproar and tumult, amidst shrieking wind and lashing rain, and the roar of the triumphant water, arose a frightened voice that cried aloud how the black tarn on Pen Mawth, swollen long, had burst for the second time in eight hundred years, and filled the glen, and how mill and miller, and all that drew the breath of life within that desolate ravine, had perished in the

darkness, amidst the inundation that had swept down, pitiless, from the mountain-side!

CHAPTER XIV.

RALPH SWART'S HEIRESS.

DAY had dawned, and the red streaks in the sky had changed, slowly, into the reluctant light of a stormy winter morning, as a party of wayfarers, coming up from Tregunnow, approached the ravine in which the Mawth Mill was built. Some of them wore police helmets and police uniforms, others were in the garb of ordinary life. That stalwart form in front can

belong to no other than Hugh—so long called Ashton in these pages—while beside him is Mr. Dicker, whom even his London engagements and world-wide business have not prevented from being present on this occasion; and at the capitalist's elbow walks a stout-built, pleasant-visaged man, the first sight of whose well-fed face suggests visions of oil-cake, root-crops, and gold medals vigorously competed for at the Agricultural Hall in Islington, but who probably knows nothing of beef until it reaches the butcher's shop-front and the kitchen; being no other than Sergeant Brow of the detectives, a ministering sprite from Scotland Yard, whose services Mr. Dicker has had reason to appreciate before to-day.

It was windy and gusty yet. The rain

that still fell was but puny rain, like the dropping fire of skirmishers that sometimes succeeds the thunder-crash of a general action, and the furious torrent that had wrought such mischief in the night had had time to shrink to more moderate dimensions. But, even at Tregunnow, cellars and basements had been filled, and gardens choked with peat and mud washed down from the mountain-side; while rumour, which deals ever in the superlative, had represented the exposed Mill of Pen Mawth as having not one stone left standing upon another.

"I fear he has escaped us," said Hugh, more in sorrow than in anger, as he and his companions passed on, catching at intervals a glimpse of the turbid flood rushing so

hurriedly down in its tumultuous passage towards the sea.

That one so wily and alert as Ralph Swart had actually perished by drowning had not seemed probable, either to the Cornish county police, to the experienced detective from London, or to Hugh and his friend Mr. Dicker. To them, the storm of the previous night presented itself rather in the light of an untoward accident, likely to have given the alarm to the formidable occupant of the Mill of Death, and to have caused him to be elsewhere than at home when the domiciliary visit of the police should be paid. Warrants, as promised by Sir Henry Marsden, had been duly issued, authorizing the arrest of James Grewler, otherwise Ralph Swart, and as formally

endorsed by justices of the peace for the county of Cornwall. And there was Sampson Brow, sergeant in the Detective branch of the Force, of which Scotland Yard forms the head-quarters, ready to lend the aid of his valuable advice, should the local officers be at fault. But, for all that, there were few hopes of a successful result.

"I'm afraid you're right, my lord. We shall find the bird flown," said the sergeant, touching his hat.

Presently, turning an angle of the rocky road, the party of seekers from Tregunnow became aware that they were not the only ones whom curiosity or interest had caused to be early abroad. Numbers of the country-people had collected in the lower part of the ravine, still encumbered by torn-up

trees, and bushes uprooted, and turf, and rocks, rolled down the hill-side by the resistless force of the now subsiding torrent. One group had gathered around the half-submerged carcass of a dead horse that lay across a tongue of land projecting itself into the stream. The poor brute had evidently struggled hard to gain the bank.

"It is the Black Miller's horse," said one of the labourers.

"Are you sure of that?" asked the inspector of the county police.

"Quite sure, master," was the answer. "See! there be some of the woodwork of the shed that was used for a stable, and there's the broken halter still."

A little farther on, and the Mawth Mill

itself was in sight. Popular rumour, in reporting its destruction, had erred, as usual, on the side of exaggeration. There had been much damage done. The out-buildings had been washed away. The mill-dam had been demolished. The shattered fragments of the great wheel might be seen mingled with brushwood and rubbish at the edge of the stream. But the strong masonry had stood sturdily against the rush of the black flood, and the walls remained unbreached. There was a deep pool of foam-flecked water around the dwelling-house, and it was necessary to wade before the door, still fast closed, could be reached. Near the house itself the gazers had gathered thickest, and

among them was a spare elderly gentleman in clerical attire, who seemed to be giving orders to the rest.

"Our vicar, gentlemen, from Tregunnow —Mr. Mulgrave," whispered the local inspector of police; and then he approached the clergyman and said something in a low voice. The vicar started, turned round, and courteously raised his hat.

"You are here, gentlemen, as I understand, on business," said the clergyman; "so am I, for mine is a large parish, and Mawth Hamlet and Mawth Mill are included in it. But I am afraid we shall find no one living here. Swart the Miller is either absent, or he has perished. We have knocked repeatedly, without any answer being returned. And I was just telling

the men that they had better force the door."

"We have authority to make an entry in any case," replied Mr. Dicker. "This man Swart is charged with wilful murder; and our errand here is to bring him to justice for a crime committed five-and-twenty years ago."

There was a stir and a murmur among the crowd; but, if there was some excitement, there was no astonishment. All seemed prepared to hear the worst of the Black Miller that could be heard. Meanwhile preparations were being made for bursting open the door. A beam had been brought, and slung as a rude sort of battering-ram, from the shoulders of several men. The first shock awakened the sullen

echoes of the dark uninviting house; but the door resisted. A second and more vigorous thrust, and it gave way; while forth through the aperture poured a fresh torrent of turbid water, and it was not until some minutes had elapsed that the house could be entered.

"There he be—there be Master Swart!" exclaimed a dozen voices at once. Yes; he was there, the man they sought, the secret assassin who had cheated justice so long. He lay there, fully dressed, his dead face upturned, his right arm and hand extended, as if in the attempt to undo the fastenings of the door, and escape, surprised as he had been by the flood of angry water that had broken in at the back of the house, and which had filled the lower rooms

almost to the beams of the ceiling. There he lay, grim and threatening of aspect to the last, not unpunished, though no clerk of assize was to record, for Doom, the sentence pronounced on James Grewler. And Hugh looked down on his bitter enemy, unseen before, with a sort of awe, as men do when earthly revenge is baffled by the interposition of a higher power than theirs.

"Vengeance is the Lord's!" said the clergyman, breaking the silence that ensued.

Upstairs were found ample proofs of Swart's or Grewler's guilt, proofs sufficient, had they been produced in court, to have given his neck over to the hangman, even without the additional evidence at the com-

mand of the Crown. There were letters proving the motive which had led to the commission of the murder so long ago. Marmaduke Beville had detected, or fancied he had detected, something wrong in the steward's accounts, and, without mentioning to his father the suspicions he had formed as to Grewler's dishonesty, had repeatedly threatened the dishonest steward with dismissal and disgrace.

"Threatened men live long," was Grewler's cynical comment, in the form of a marginal note on Marmaduke Beville's letter. To murder the eldest son of his deceived employer, and artfully to throw the blame of the murder on the second, had been James Grewler's counterplot. To this end he had purloined the pistol;

while the gun, a present from Lord Penrith, with which the deed was done, was found in the murderer's bed-room at the Mill.

A careful search, in executing which there was no lack of volunteers, led to the discovery, in a secret cupboard, of an iron safe containing a great sum of money in notes and gold, in silver, and even in copper coin. The Black Miller's hoard amounted to almost fourteen thousand pounds; the larger portion of which, no doubt, consisted of the funds embezzled while Grewler was steward at Alfringham, and to which, as Mr. Dicker whispered, Hugh had a legal claim.

"I shall make no claim," answered Hugh.

At that moment there rose up from below a babble and outcry of shrill female voices, as, in the midst of a knot of gesticulating women, there drew near the house the thin and bending form of a young girl, travel-stained, weary, and haggard, yet decently attired, and with a modest, shrinking air, which matched well with the sickly aspect of the pinched face and wistful eyes.

"It's herself, it's poor Jane Swart—the Miller's daughter—her he drove away, the Lord forgive him! come back now, on such a day as this!" cried the excited women.

Yes; it was Jane Swart, the young daughter whom, five years ago, the Black Miller

in his drunken fury had driven out into the world, bidding her starve or steal, for he would bear with her whimpering voice and whey-faced looks no more. The poor thing had earned what was called her living—dying by inches would have been a truer term—by plying her needle sixteen hours a day for bare bread and decent lodging beneath the roof of a seamstress at Falmouth, who found it all too hard to maintain herself and her children to be over-tender with the young woman who worked under her orders. And now that consumption had set its seal on her, and that her weary eyes could see the thread no more, she had perforce wandered back, saying, simply:

"Let my father kill me, if he will—as I have seen him kill many a dumb thing—but he is my father, and I have nowhere else to go."

All pitied her. Most of those who saw her remembered her. The vicar told her to be of good cheer. Her father was dead, it was true, but she was among friends, and would be poor no longer. He would himself provide her with a comfortable lodging among kind people at Tregunnow. A few formalities complied with, and she would be rich. She was heiress to fourteen thousand pounds.

"I shall not live long enough to enjoy them," said the girl, with a wan smile, and her hacking cough and lustreless

eye told that she had spoken truly. The evil that the Black Miller had done lived after him.

CHAPTER THE LAST.

YOUNG LORD PENRITH.

WITH all the state and splendour and ceremony that became his rank, the aged Lord Penrith was borne to the tomb. And then, indeed, Alfringham knew a new master. Hugh offered his house, for a while, to Mrs. Stanhope, who was reluctant to quit her home of many years' date; but Maud prevailed, and she and her mother went to reside, quietly enough, in the Isle of Wight, until the day should come when

Maud—Maud Stanhope no more, should recross the threshold of Alfringham as the beloved bride of its young lord. The day came, six months later; but the wedding, which took place in the little church of Alfringham village, was not a very gay or sumptuous one, on account of respect due to the old grandsire, whose word, but a little while before, had been law at Alfringham and for many a mile around.

The first and only visit which young Lord and Lady Penrith—Hugh and Maud —paid after their return to England from the bridal tour that custom renders necessary, was to Llosthuel Court. And, while guests of the hospitable Dowager, it scarcely needs to be said how the Lord and Lady of Alfringham went to visit Rose—Rose

Trawl no more—but Will Farleigh's happy, pretty wife; for this young couple had been wedded, by particular desire, on the same day as that which witnessed the union of Hugh and Maud Stanhope. Rose and her brisk young husband had not, thanks to Hugh's gratitude for kind services so opportunely rendered, to plunge into matrimony with no surer prospects than those which were based on the uncertain gains of a bird-hunter. An income, handsome in the eyes of the two young people, had been secured to them from their wedding-day; but it was not until the green leaves of another autumn had turned to red and brown, that old Captain Job Trawl died, and that Maud's husband, at Maud's wish, willingly placed

Will Farleigh in a snug farm, within a mile or two of Alfringham, and persuaded the Cornish couple to transfer their household deities to Dorsetshire, where they have thriven. 'Nezer, the dwarf, with some regrets, was induced to expatriate himself also from the sight and smell of the sea; and Neptune's honest bark is yet heard on the farm, where Rose Farleigh's children tell their tiny playfellows from the Hall what good service the brave dog did, at "my lord's" side, in a Cornish shipwreck years ago.

Mr. Dicker always remained Hugh's truest and most valued friend, and, in the maelström of his ever increasing business, finds time annually to pass some happy days at Alfringham. The money which he

owed to Hugh's dead father has been expended, at Lord Penrith's wish, in establishing fresh lifeboats at Treport and St. Mary's bay. Another benefaction, of a less useful character, it may be, shortly after the catastrophe of the Mawth Mill, accrued to the poor of that poverty-stricken part of Cornwall in which Pen Mawth stands. Poor consumptive Jane Swart—whose name should have been Grewler—sleeps at her mother's side beneath a headstone in Tregunnow churchyard; and by her last will and testament she left her fourteen thousand pounds, the hoard of the Black Miller her father, to found certain almshouses for the benefit of the needy in Tregunnow and the parts adjacent. Ralph Swart's name and age, with a Scripture

verse beneath, may be seen on a plain flat flagstone hard by the resting-places of his wife and daughter. It was not a case for eulogistic epitaphs; nor has the dismal Mill of Pen Mawth ever again been under repair.

Mrs. Stanhope, who inherited money under her brother's will, lives with Lady Larpent at Llosthuel Court, and her presence is a solace to the Dowager, who is neither so hale nor so cheerful as she used to be. Her two younger boys—Edgar, who is called Sir Edgar, and on whom the baronetcy has presumably devolved, and Willie—are good, bright boys enough, dutiful and affectionate; but they are much away, one with his regiment, and the other at the university; and Lady Larpent has

never quite recovered the shock caused by the mysterious disappearance of Sir Lucius, her eldest son. Money was spent, and exertions made, we may be sure, to trace out the missing ne'er-do-well; but in vain. The people at the inn where the horse and dog-cart from Llosthuel had been left knew nothing, save that the gentleman who so left them had started by the train; but it so chanced that no one in Tregunnow or Mawth had seen Sir Lucius on the fatal day of his visit to the Black Miller, and that his bones may lie undisturbed at the bottom of the abandoned mine until the Judgment Day.

One or two of the minor characters in this history have yet to be accounted for. Ghost Nan, the gipsy, yet walks the world,

and it is not probable that she should have wholly relinquished her favourite camping-grounds in the vicinity of the New Forest; but, from the day when she was prompted to make depositions before a magistrate of the hated Busné, the old spirit of lawlessness seems to have been revived in her wild nature; and Hugh, though he occasionally heard of her, was never again able to have sight of, or speech with, the half-crazed wanderer. Salem Jackson, who in consideration of his readiness to turn Queen's evidence was let off with more lenity than he deserved, recrossed the Atlantic, and was last heard of as a boarder, with a twenty years' sentence to endure, in the Tombs, New York, whence, if what we hear of the severities of American prison discipline be

true, he runs little chance of emerging to prey upon the honest portion of the community.

And Hugh? and Maud? Loving and beloved, they may, from the setting in of that new-born period of well-deserved prosperity which succeeded to Hugh Ashton's early struggles, be compared with those happy nations of whom no story can be told. Brighter days, indeed, than those of a stormy youth spent in adventurous exile, or in poverty at home, have dawned upon Young Lord Penrith.

THE END.

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